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ABSTRACT

This handbook is intended to help teachers at the college/university level assess the quality of their teaching in ways that can lead to improvement. It opens with an overview of various sources and methods of feedback likely to be most helpful and then examines how each of a range of approaches to teaching can be systematically reviewed. These include: (1) lecturing (reviewing an individual lecture, reviewing a lecture series, the lecturing process, and enhancing the lecture); (2) group-based learning (reviewing a tutorial, reviewing a series of tutorials, developing student skills, and extending expertise); (3) laboratory and fieldwork practicals (setting the agenda and methods of review); (4) project and dissertation supervision (key aspects of supervision, reviewing the student documentation, tracking student progress, ensuring equity of treatment, student feedback on projects and dissertations, and reviewing with colleagues); and (5) assignments and assessments (focus areas and sources of information, assignment setting, carrying out assessment, assignment outcomes, and assessment expertise). A final chapter stresses ongoing assessment of teaching. (Individual chapters contain references.) Contains 38 figures. (DB)

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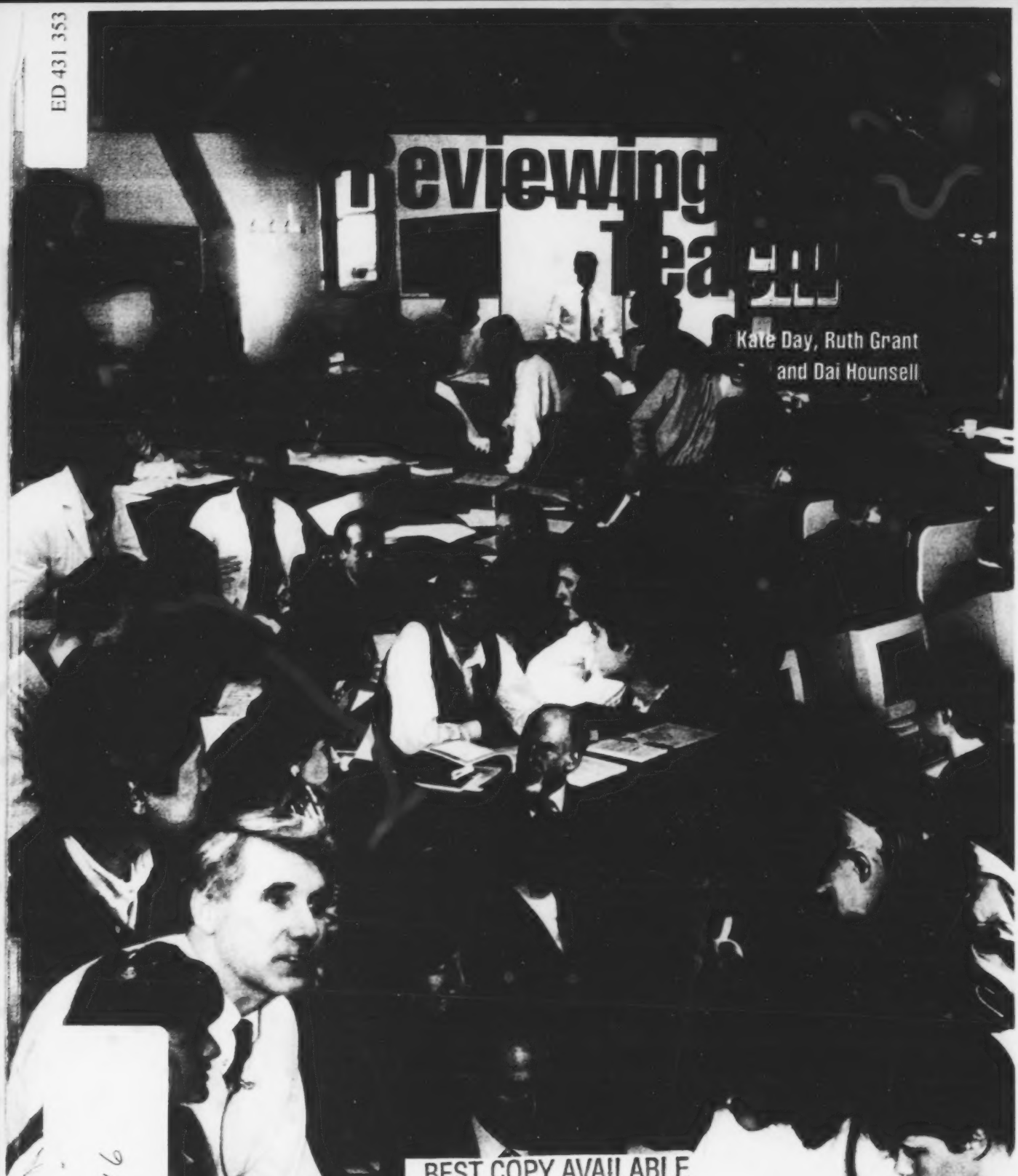

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Kate Day, Ruth Grant
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Kate Day, Ruth Grant and Dai Hounsell

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Chapter 1
Introduction

O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us
To see oursels as others see us!
It wad frae monie a blunder free us,
An' foolish notion.[1]

Robert Burns

The main aim of this handbook is to help you to review the quality of your teaching in ways that can lead to real and worthwhile improvements. The handbook opens with a concise overview of the kinds of sources and methods of feedback that you are likely to find most helpful, before moving on to look in turn at how each of a range of approaches to teaching commonly used in higher education can be systematically reviewed.

This is by no means the first handbook of this kind,[2] but what differentiates it from its predecessors are three important characteristics. First, earlier handbooks on the topic have not drawn a clear and necessary distinction between what is involved in getting good feedback on degree courses and programmes, on the one hand, and on the other, what is involved in getting good feedback on one's own teaching expertise. The former is designed to meet the needs of course teams and their students, in the first instance, while also being increasingly necessary to meet the requirements of quality audit and quality assessment. Its predominant aims are therefore to survey the various elements which go to make up a course or programme of study, and to establish how well they hang together as a coherent whole.[3] But while such feedback can often provide useful pointers to issues of concern, it does not usually provide individuals with the kind of fine-grained information which can help them to pinpoint strengths and weaknesses accurately, or to document their developing expertise in the form of a teaching portfolio or dossier (see the section below entitled 'Review and Accreditation').

Secondly, the main focus of this handbook is on the different kinds of teaching in which you are likely to be engaged, and on how each of these might best be reviewed. Thus, though we outline and consider the various sources and methods of feedback open to you, these form part of the background rather than the foreground of the discussion. Put another way, what is being reviewed – and the particular issues which might need to be explored – takes precedence over how the review is conducted. This also means that, for each of the teaching domains considered, we have tried to present frameworks of questions and issues that are likely to arise, and through which the effectiveness of your teaching can be systematically considered.

Thirdly, the handbook takes a deliberately strategic approach to considering methods of obtaining feedback. Left out of account, for example, are techniques such as interviewing individual students, where the benefits to be derived are unlikely to justify the large amount of time and effort required. Similarly, though we see questionnaires as a potentially valuable element in a feedback strategy, we have avoided recommending the kinds of complex and lengthy questionnaires which would be very demanding to process and analyse. This approach, then, reflects the greatly intensified workload pressures on the contemporary university or college teacher. Reviewing one's teaching well is a highly desirable goal, but it should not call for a disproportionate amount of effort. It is best carried out selectively, with an eye to individual and professional needs and priorities.

This also means making full use of the potentially helpful information which already exists, whether as the natural product of a course or as the result of

course feedback mechanisms. Accordingly we emphasise the value of capitalising on incidental or unobtrusive feedback, as well as tapping other information channels on a rather more formal or regular basis. We highlight specific methods and sources of feedback for each of the teaching activities typically associated with taught courses in higher education: lectures; tutorials and other forms of group-based learning; laboratory and fieldwork practicals; the supervision of projects and dissertations; and assignments and assessment. Indications are given as to what makes a particular strategy for collecting feedback an appropriate choice, and the practical suggestions made as to how it can be successfully implemented are supported by a large number of examples of suitable resource materials. These materials are also being made available on the World Wide Web, in a form which can be easily downloaded. The *Reviewing Your Teaching* website can be found at: http://www.tla.ed.ac.uk/ryt.html.

TARGETING AND TAILORING TO PERSONAL NEEDS

Where the primary purpose of gathering and reviewing feedback information is to build on strengths and to remedy weaknesses, there is ample scope for personal choice and control. What kind of information you decide you want, when, how and from whom it is collected, are all for you to resolve. So too is the sense which you make of it and the action that you subsequently take. Tailoring the review to match your own needs and style of teaching is therefore of the essence; and although augmenting or fleshing out data drawn from more 'official' sources is often involved, it is otherwise largely independent of whatever formal arrangements are in place.

In reviewing teaching, the information most commonly sought after is diagnostic – and in more than one sense. First, it may be diagnostic in the sense of trying to pinpoint what it is about what you do that makes your teaching more or less effective. This can involve encouraging others to target their comments in ways that help tease out practical cause-and-effect examples, for instance, or seeking to obtain more illuminative detail about an area already identified as needing attention. A second sense in which reviewing your teaching may be diagnostic relates to when feedback is elicited. For you do not have to wait until the end of a course before obtaining feedback. You can take soundings whenever it seems most appropriate to home in on an issue, and at points when there will still be opportunities to plug gaps or remedy shortcomings.

But in common with all kinds of data, gathering information is only the beginning, not the end. Feedback has to be collated and analysed, and then interpreted, because it will seldom speak for itself. Any ostensible 'evidence' needs putting in context and setting alongside other findings which may or may not bear it out. Only then can the implications be considered in the light of the teaching and learning outcomes you had anticipated and the possibilities for action open to you.

Over and above the obvious merits of carrying out the process thoroughly and systematically, there are other compelling considerations. One is simply that of keeping faith – with the students and colleagues who have taken the trouble to provide constructive feedback – by engaging with the findings. Another is that getting students involved in feeding back their reactions, particularly during rather than at the end of the teaching, increases interaction and enhances their sense of involvement. It is much more likely to help create a climate of trust and respect based on the recognition of teaching and learning as a joint enterprise. Likewise encouraging colleagues to engage in discussion at a personal level about various aspects of teaching provides mutual insights into styles and strategies that otherwise tend not to be explicitly articulated.

REVIEW AND ACCREDITATION

Increasingly, reviews of teaching are being undertaken not only for personal and professional development purposes but also to meet formal requirements associated with an award-bearing programme or as part of promotion procedures.

As this handbook goes to press, plans are well-advanced for the establishment of an Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (ILT), one of the main functions of which will be the accreditation of higher education teachers who have successfully completed award-bearing programmes in their own institutions. Some programmes of this kind are already in place while many others are in the process of being established, and it seems very likely that teaching portfolios, dossiers or profiles will be a prominent feature in the assessment schemes adopted.[4]

Portfolios offer a flexible means of documenting teaching expertise which can take account of differences between disciplines and subject areas, patterns of teaching responsibilities and varying

lengths of teaching experience. This handbook can therefore be of great assistance to colleagues in compiling a portfolio for accreditation purposes, as it offers abundant scope for tailoring reviews to meet individual as well as institutional requirements. And since the accent throughout the handbook is on a reflective approach to review, it can serve as a strong foundation for the critical and analytical overview of accomplishments which most accreditation schemes also call for.

It should also be invaluable in assembling a portfolio to be submitted as part of an application for promotion to, for instance, a senior lectureship. Here again, flexibility and tailoring are of the essence, but whereas portfolios prepared for accreditation are usually intended to demonstrate competence, a promotion submission will need to go further and underpin a case for excellence. Careful thought will thus need to be given not only to how and what to review, but also on what basis a claim for teaching excellence is to be made. Has the greatest impact on teaching been in relation to the quality of students' learning, the quality of particular courses and study programmes, the quality of teaching at departmental or faculty level or across the institution, or the quality of the teaching of the discipline nationally or internationally?[5] And how might achievements in one or more of these areas best be documented? In most cases, this is likely to entail combining evidence of achievements with a representative selection of material on review outcomes. But it is doubtful whether the latter could realistically be put together shortly before an annual promotions round. Taking review seriously means making it an integral and regular part of your day-to-day professional practice: and if it is something you have not yet made much of a start on, would there really be a better time to begin than now?

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1. Burns, R. 'To a Louse, On Seeing one on a Lady's Bonnet at Church'. In: *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*. Edited by J. Kinsley. Oxford: Clarendon Press. (1968). p.194.

2. See for example; Gibbs, G. et al (1988). *53 Interesting Ways to Appraise your Teaching*. Bristol: Technical and Educational Services; O'Neil, M. and Pennington, G. (1992). *Evaluating Teaching and Courses from an Active Learning Perspective*. Module 12 in the series *Effective Learning and Teaching in Higher Education*. Sheffield: UCoSDA; Ramsden, P. and Dodds, A. (1989). *Improving Teaching and Courses: A Guide to Evaluation*. 2nd edition, Melbourne: University of Melbourne, Centre for the Study of Higher Education.

3. Hounsell, D., Tait, H. and Day, K. (1997). *Feedback on Courses and Programes of Study*. Edinburgh, Sheffield and Johannesburg: TLA Centre, UCoSDA and IHEDSA.

4. See for example: Canadian Association of University Teachers (1978). *Guide to the Teaching Dossier: Its Preparation and Use*. Montreal: McGill University, Centre for Teaching and Learning Services; Edgerton, R. et al. (1991). *The Teaching Portfolio: Capturing the Scholarship in Teaching*. Washington, D.C.: American Association for Higher Education; Elton, L. and Partington, P. (1993). *Teaching Standards and Excellence in Higher Education: Developing a Culture for Quality*. 2nd edn. Sheffield: UCoSDA; Gibbs, G. (1993). *Creating a Teaching Profile*. Bristol: Technical & Educational Services; Seldin, P. (1991). *The Teaching Portfolio: A Practical Guide to Improved Performance and Promotion/Tenure Decisions*. Boston, Mass.: Anker.

5. See Hounsell, D. (1996). Documenting and Assessing Teaching Excellence. In: Aylett, R. and Gregory, K., eds., *Evaluating Teaching Quality in Higher Education*. London: Falmer Press. pp.72-76.

Chapter 2

Basic Feedback Methods and Sources

> None of us who has been a teacher is anywhere near as good as we can be, if we are not routinely getting feedback from students. Feedback is not praise or blame. It's what you did and did not do, whether you realized it or intended it.'
>
> *Grant Wiggins*

INTRODUCTION

In higher education, the means and ends of review have not always been clearly differentiated, with the result that a particular technique (the end-of-course student questionnaire would be the most obvious example) has sometimes been seen as if it equated with 'getting feedback' or 'doing an evaluation', without sufficient regard to whether it was likely to meet the purposes for which the review was being undertaken.

Our aim in this chapter is not to argue for any one technique, but instead to outline the wide variety of sources and methods of seeking feedback which are open to you, and from which you can select, combine and adapt to meet your review needs in a given situation. In later chapters, we shall try to show which sources and methods might best be deployed in reviewing a particular approach to teaching.

THE REVIEW PROCESS

If we consider the various elements of the review process there are six main stages involved: clarifying the aim and focus; devising a review strategy; gathering feedback; analysing and interpreting the feedback; deciding on action; and implementing any changes. As figure 2.1 overleaf indicates, there is as much to consider and do once the feedback has been gathered in, as there is leading up to the collection of feedback information. Moreover, reviewing your teaching is an ongoing process, for you will want to monitor the impact on your students' learning of any adjustments and changes that you make.

But critical to all reviewing, once you have clarified why it is needed, what is expected from it, and what are the salient issues to focus on, is to decide whose perspectives on your teaching you will tap into and how you will do so.

INCIDENTAL FEEDBACK

One of the simplest and most immediate sources of feedback is also one that is, curiously, less widely exploited than it deserves to be. It is 'incidental' feedback – information which is routinely generated in the course of everyday teaching. Whether you are reviewing your lecturing, tutoring, use of course materials or approaches to assessment, you can take advantage of incidental feedback by tuning into the various kinds of information which come your way and monitoring them more systematically. The results of your monitoring can then be evaluated in the light of other feedback that has been gathered before deciding what action, if any, is necessary.

Several broad indicators of how students are responding to your teaching are readily available. Alongside the obvious marker of students' attendance patterns, other useful indications are their attentiveness, their readiness to take note of what you are saying, and their willingness to interact by asking or answering questions. Other pointers can, of course, be gleaned from the work – written, practical and oral – produced by students during a teaching unit or course. If your lectures, for example, include material unavailable to students from other sources, then essays or tutorial discussion can throw light on how far you have succeeded in getting that material across. Similarly, students' laboratory reports might show how well they had applied the theoretical background you presented in lectures or suggest how their reading had extended beyond the textbook or essential

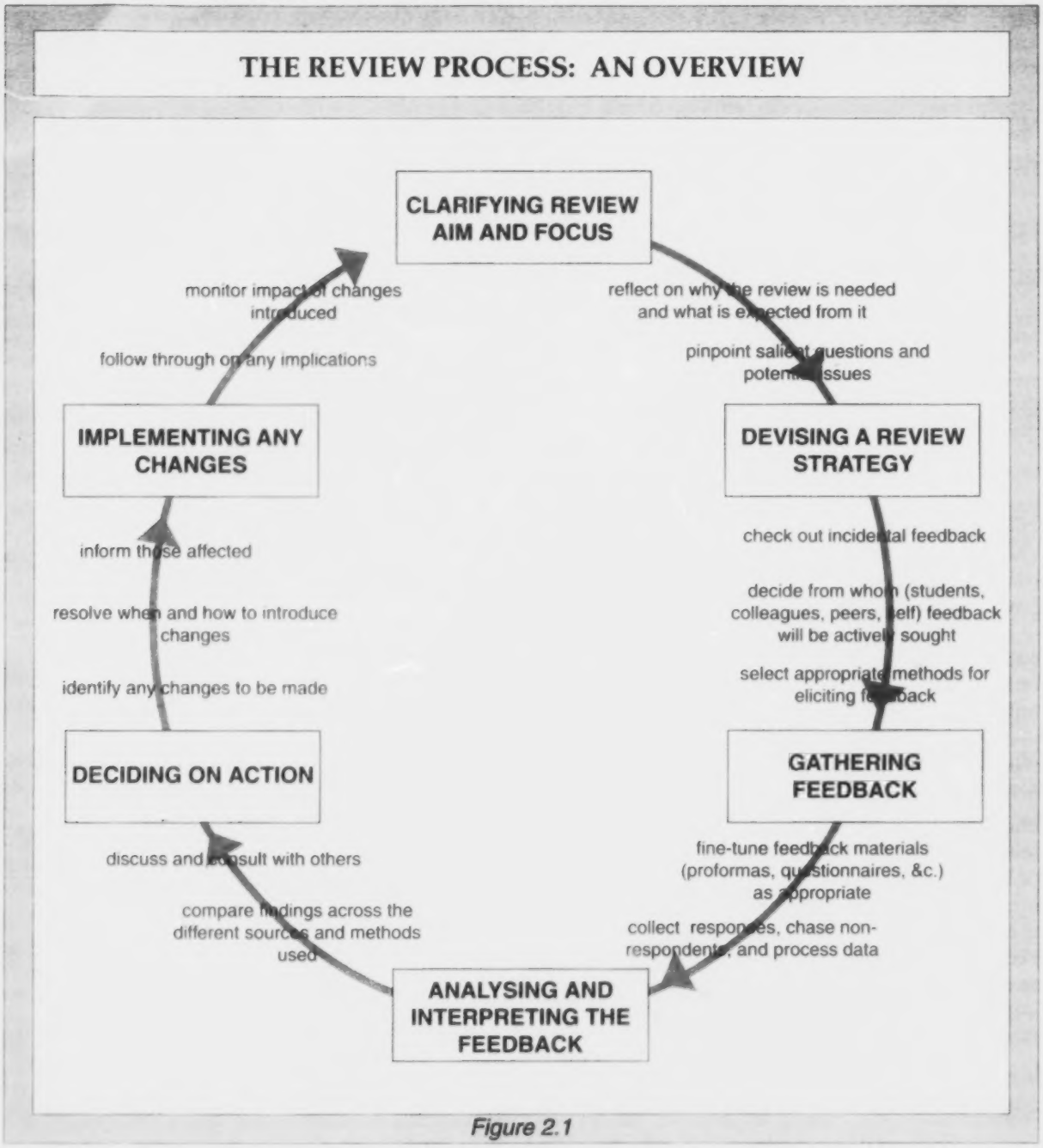
THE REVIEW PROCESS: AN OVERVIEW
CLARIFYING REVIEW AIM AND FOCUS
reflect on why the review is needed and what is expected from it
pinpoint salient questions and potential issues
DEVISING A REVIEW STRATEGY
check out incidental feedback
decide from whom (students, colleagues, peers, self) feedback will be actively sought
select appropriate methods for eliciting feedback
GATHERING FEEDBACK
fine-tune feedback materials (proformas, questionnaires, &c.) as appropriate
collect responses, chase non-respondents, and process data
ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING THE FEEDBACK
compare findings across the different sources and methods used
discuss and consult with others
DECIDING ON ACTION
identify any changes to be made
resolve when and how to introduce changes
inform those affected
IMPLEMENTING ANY CHANGES
follow through on any implications
monitor impact of changes introduced

Figure 2.1

course materials. It needs to be borne in mind, however, that it is often difficult to isolate the contribution of any one component such as lecturing and to disentangle it from other factors influencing students' output. Another very occasional possibility would be sampling students' class notes (with their permission) in order to get some indication about how well you are communicating lecture or seminar material.

Readily available sources of feedback also include information that is routinely collected throughout the academic year, such as end-of-term or end-of-course questionnaires, staff-student committees, or comments and observations made by members of examination boards (including external examiners, professional accrediting bodies or quality assessment teams). Finally, chance discussions with other academic staff and your own first-hand impressions and reflections about what is happening are an equally useful source of incidental feedback.

All these various sources can yield useful pointers to the quality of your teaching, but they will not normally provide the kind of fine-grained

information you will need to enhance your expertise in specific ways. For this purpose, more focused approaches of the kind outlined below will be necessary.

SELF-GENERATED FEEDBACK

It is not hard to see why some academics have reacted sceptically to self-generated feedback, for it lacks what gives feedback from students or colleagues its cutting edge: the outsider's view. But to reject self-generated feedback on this ground alone is to misunderstand its essential function, which is not to set yourself up as judge and jury but to cultivate reflection and systematic scrutiny. All teachers come away from a teaching session with immediate impressions of their performance – what seemed to be successful and what went less well than anticipated. Yet those impressions can all too easily slip away as your attention turns to the next pressing matter at hand. By the time you start preparing the next lecture, tutorial, lab or practical for the same group (or the same teaching session for next year's course), it may be hard to recall much that is helpfully specific.

Capitalising on those immediate impressions takes a conscious effort, and described below are ways of focusing on and taking advantage of your own perceptions about your teaching. The nature of these methods also lends a degree of distance and helps achieve somewhat greater objectivity – an important consideration since your own perceptions may provide too rosy, too bland or too critical a view. Other sources of feedback can provide a counterweight to this and help you obtain a wider and more balanced picture of your teaching.

Pro Formas and Checklists

There are many kinds of pro formas which can be used with great flexibility to elicit feedback. Generally they provide a reasonably open-ended means of prompting and structuring reflection. A typical pro forma would be one which, for instance, asks for brief statements about what went well in a particular teaching session, what did not go so well and what should be included or omitted when the session is repeated. This kind of pro forma is flexible enough to be used not only for self-generated feedback but also in seeking feedback from colleagues or students.

A more focused way of aiding reflection is to use a self-review checklist which will systematically draw attention to key dimensions of teaching such as scene-setting, structure, clarity, response to student queries, and student participation. If you are engaged in appraising an audio or video- recording, an observational checklist or pro forma can help meet the challenge of focusing your reactions in a constructive way.[2]

Marking 'attachments' are another kind of pro forma, albeit one chiefly intended to provide students with structured comment and feedback on assignments. But since anyone using marking attachments also retains file copies, the cumulative records provide a fruitful means of reappraising information on submission and marking patterns across one or more groups of students - and thus of reviewing your assessment practices.

Compiling a Personal Log

Routine self-monitoring, it has been argued, enables you to 'capitalise on the good things in your teaching and repair mistakes quickly before they get out of hand',[3] but only if done fairly systematically and kept in an accessible format, such as a loose-leaf folder. There is no particular template or format which has to be followed: what form entries into a teaching log take is very much a matter of personal choice, while the information that is

The Wrights
I'VE MADE THAT CAKE AND IT HASN'T SET AGAIN!
WEREN'T YOU GOING TO ALTER THE RECIPE IN THE BOOK?
YES BUT IT WAS SO OBVIOUS WHAT WAS WRONG AT THE TIME, I THOUGHT I'D REMEMBER
WHAT WAS WRONG?
I'VE FORGOTTEN!
©1995 ANCHA BIRD

Figure 2.2

entered will depend on what issues or concerns arise. A teaching log can incorporate your immediate post-teaching impressions recorded as and when worthwhile, together with any checklists, pro formas, or other feedback materials you have opted to use. Regularly logging your experiences of supervising students undertaking projects, for example, is a good way of keeping track of an area of teaching which is otherwise quite tricky to review. Another possibility is to augment teaching notes with your reflections or jottings about future changes. And personal feedback in a log can of course be filed alongside feedback from other sources.

FEEDBACK FROM COLLEAGUES AND PEERS

Academic colleagues – whether from your own or a cognate department – can also play a leading part in reviewing different aspects of teaching. So, too, can what we might call 'peers': those in the professions, commerce or industry with whom you have close working links, whether for teaching or research purposes. Although peers from industry or the professions are less likely to be well-versed in teaching techniques, their contributions concerning the connections between theory and practice can be especially valuable.

Good grounds for drawing on the expert knowledge of both colleagues and peers are that they can:

- pinpoint issues which students have overlooked or are less well equipped to comment on;
- comment from the vantage-point of the disinterested outsider;
- help you explore possible courses of action in the light of feedback already received.

Accordingly, colleagues or peers are not simply an alternative source of information: their contributions are both different from, and complementary to, feedback from students and from yourself. More specifically, they can comment on course structure and content, advise on the level at which teaching material is pitched and scrutinise course documentation, materials and handouts. And if a colleague or peer is in a position to offer more extensive involvement, perhaps on a mutual basis, he or she could be invited to examine links between lectures, tutorials, practicals and coursework assignments such as reports, essays and projects, or comment collaboratively on students' written work. A further possibility would involve a colleague or peer in acting as a third party and collecting evaluative information on your behalf (for example, convening a structured group discussion by your students or studying samples of students' notes).

The feedback provided by colleagues and peers can be useful at various points in the teaching - learning process, as illustrated by the methods outlined below.

Previewing

There may be occasions when waiting for feedback from colleagues or peers until after a teaching-learning activity has occurred could be a missed opportunity – preparing for a particularly difficult lecture, for instance, introducing new materials or trying out a radically different method of assessment. It is in situations such as these that previewing comes to the fore. Previewing activities or materials in advance is a pro-active and collaborative approach to review. Trying to anticipate potential problem areas enables you to benefit from a colleague's insights and experiences before a teaching session actually occurs. It is designed to prompt reflection and reappraisal, and so lead into constructive discussion about how best to address the issues raised.

Observing

Asking a trusted colleague or a peer to observe a class or a series of classes can also be an invaluable developmental tool. Observation can be either direct (the observer sits in on the class) or indirect (the observer studies a video- or audio-tape) and is usually best suited to lecturing, although it can be also used to help review other teaching-learning situations. Careful advance briefing is however essential in order to highlight teaching strengths and areas for improvement: the observer needs to be aware of where any particular session fits within a teaching programme and what aspects of the observed class should be the focus of attention. Observation can concentrate on various aspects of teaching, such as presentation technique, subject material and the ways in which students seem to be responding. A targeted checklist or pro forma can be useful in helping to identify and record specific practical examples to inform subsequent discussion. The question of when and how feedback is best given – immediately afterwards or somewhat later, whether verbally or in written form

– is also a matter for prior agreement, but will depend on personal preferences and mutual convenience.

Retracing

Asking a colleague or peer to help you retrace a teaching session or an assignment you have set provides another avenue of feedback. Retracing a session which may not have gone as well as anticipated (or an assessment task which has proved problematic) can help pinpoint the nature of the difficulties and highlight ways forward. Retracing can also be a powerful confidence-booster, indicating (say) that a given session in fact went reasonably well and that your misgivings related to minor details rather than major issues. Involving a colleague in retracing how effectively you offered feedback to students on a piece of written work (collaborative commenting) is another productive possibility which can, for example, generate advice on how to improve the quality of your comments while reducing the time spent on each script.

In cases where you have shared a similar teaching function with colleagues (such as marking essays from a large survey course or supervising undergraduate projects or dissertations), it can be helpful to meet at appropriate points to retrace steps collectively. Similarly, you may sometimes find yourself in a context where some of the teaching which you have planned or organised is actually carried out by others such as tutors, demonstrators, or teaching assistants. There are thus opportunities to retrace from a supervisory standpoint by routinely tapping into their first-hand experiences of what is happening on the ground and of how things are working out in practice.

In all situations in which colleagues or peers are used, there is a justifiable concern to ensure that confidentiality is maintained and that feedback is offered in a non-judgmental and constructively critical way which respects others' styles of teaching. A corollary of this is making sure that equal time is allowed for both your colleague's comments and your own responses, so as to encourage fairness and full discussion. The point of the exercise, after all, is to stimulate collaborative reflection and shared insights about teaching, with the emphasis firmly on development.

Who you invite to contribute is up to you and may vary according to where you are in your teaching career or what you would like to review. There is little to be gained from an experience that turns out to be intimidating or unconstructive, and the most sensible approach is therefore to choose a colleague or peer with whom you feel comfortable and who is likely to be able to offer sound and useful advice. Once your colleague has agreed to participate, the practical arrangements and ground rules are worth clarifying beforehand so as to avoid misunderstandings. Your colleague will want to know what the commitment entails, since you are asking them to commit scarce time and effort, while you for your own part may reasonably feel that some aspects of your teaching should not be subject to comment.

FEEDBACK FROM STUDENTS

Since teaching is carried out for the benefit of students, they are a natural source of feedback and well-placed to comment on aspects of teaching such as clarity, pacing of the material, adequecy of learning resources, rapport, and helpfulness of tutors' feedback on their progress and performance. But their involvement in review will make calls on their time and energies, and therefore should not be taken for granted. Indeed, the more students perceive you as welcoming their opinions and being receptive to their concerns, the more forthcoming they are likely to be in providing informed and open comment.

Although some impressions of students' views may come across via the sort of course-based feedback which departments routinely obtain through summative questionnaires or staff-student consultations, the information which these yield may well not be sufficiently concrete or finely tuned for your own purposes. Thus it is worth considering how to seek feedback from students in a form geared to your specific needs. Three methods likely to prove especially useful are questionnaires and pro formas, structured group discussion, and student panels.

Questionnaires and Pro Formas

The type of questionnaire likely to be of most value to you in reviewing your teaching is a diagnostic one, which can help you either to find out more about a specific area not addressed in detail by whatever course feedback has already been gathered, or to get a better feel for how things are going as your teaching proceeds. Diagnostic questionnaires are usually short and sharply focused and tailored to eliciting well-targeted responses. They tend to avoid at least some of the pitfalls associated with questionnaire fatigue and

to reduce the practical demands which would otherwise fall upon you at the analysis stage.

Once you are clear about what you want to find out about your teaching and why, the next step is to determine the scope of the questionnaire and settle on an appropriate format. There is bound to be some degree of trade-off between what is manageable in a practical sense and what will help you to improve your teaching. Fixed-category questions (where students choose from a number of set responses, say, by ticking the appropriate box) are more readily quantified, but they do not give students much freedom to highlight their own concerns. More open-ended questions, on the other hand, often prompt rich and insightful responses, but suffer from the drawback that they may provide a less rounded picture of class opinion – and just like any other data, still need to be systematically analysed.

If you have decided to home in on a specific aspect of your teaching such as study materials, tasks set for tutorials or practicals, or the handling of feedback on coursework, you may find that the most straightforward route to coming up with a suitable questionnaire is to select or adapt items from one or more existing questionnaires. It is often advantageous to have a mix of closed and open-ended questions and to maximise response rates by having students complete the questionnaires during class time.

Where your main concern is to obtain formative feedback which will help shape your ongoing teaching, 'instant' or 'one-minute' questionnaires or pro formas may prove to be an attractive option. Typically these focus on a small number of questions which students can therefore respond to quickly. Yet despite this restricted focus, the questions posed can range widely. You can check, for example, whether students have grasped the main points of a lecture, practical or tutorial (e.g. 'what are the three most important points covered in this class?' and 'what are three questions that you have at the end of this class?') or obtain broader viewpoints (e.g. 'jot down three good features about my teaching and three that could be improved'). Conveying the questions, whether verbally or via the board or OHP, need only take five minutes or so at the end of the class, and you can collect the replies (which can be made on, for example post-its or index cards) as the students leave. You then group and count the answers around the common themes which emerge, so as to identify the salient issues and assess the strength of student feeling.

Having completed the processing of a diagnostic questionnaire, you can make sense of the findings and decide what, if any, action is needed either by yourself or with the aid of a colleague. Last, but not least, you will need to inform your students of the outcomes if they are to feel that their efforts have been worthwhile.

Structured Group Discussion

Convening a structured group discussion is another means of obtaining helpful student feedback within which students are free to define the particular aspects which matter to them. Structuring a discussion is achieved:

- by setting a specific discussion task – e.g. to work on a small number of open-ended questions;
- by following a sequence of reflection, sharing in sub-groups, and plenary review.

If the discussion is to go well, you will need to set aside class time – up to an hour typically. But you will not have to spend time analysing the results, and the raising of the issues is achieved in a public and open way. There is also the opportunity to clarify students' opinions and to assess their relative importance. Managing the discussion, however, calls for skill and sensitivity; you can either choose to do this yourself or call upon the services of a colleague.

In choosing a focus for the discussion, the possibilities include:

- displaying a thematic agenda or short checklist of key questions for students to consider, such as asking them to identify the three best and the three worst features of, for example, practicals, tutorials or lecturing;
- inviting students to discuss the results and implications of a questionnaire which they had completed earlier in the course. Discussion could seek to explore further some of the findings on a specific issue or concentrate on what action might be appropriate.

A structured discussion normally begins with individual reflection, and a moratorium on conferring helps students to focus their personal views. Encouraging students to jot down their thoughts both assists reflection and underscores the value placed on each student's contribution.

SOURCES AND METHODS OF REVIEW: A SUMMARY

SELF	
preview	with checklists and pro formas
observation of audio/videotapes	with checklists and pro formas
logging	with diaries, journals and logs
retracing	with checklists and pro formas

STUDENTS	
class survey	with questionnaires, pro formas and post-its
group discussion(s)	with or without pro formas, posters or overhead transparencies
selective sampling	via student panels or sub-groups

COLLEAGUES	
observation	with checklists and pro formas
critical scrutiny	of course documentation and teaching-learning materials
collaborative comment	on students' written work
third-party convening	of group or panel discussions

INCIDENTAL	
monitoring	of students' attendance patterns, involvement, take-up of options, etc.
re-appraisal	of overall quality of students' assignments, patterns of questions chosen, classwork
re-scrutiny	of comments in staff-student committees, exam boards, etc.

Figure 2.3

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Students then form into small groups, which can range in size up to about six persons. First, each member of the sub-group gives his or her response to the focus questions or themes posed. Second, the sub-group as a whole is asked to come to a collective view, which will subsequently be conveyed to the larger group. This helps confer a measure of anonymity, which is essential if students are not to be inhibited from expressing their views openly and honestly.

The final step is plenary discussion. One approach is for each sub-group to report in turn, whether via a rapporteur, a flip chart summary, or a combination of the two. Other options particularly suited for use with larger classes are to:

- use a 'round', inviting each sub-group to feed in *one* point or issue that has not been raised by any other group. You continue with further 'rounds', until all the points raised in the sub-groups appear in the collective summary;
- ask each sub-group to select, from the issues it has discussed, the two or three most important ones – or those, say, on which there is a clear consensus.

Whichever approach you adopt, it is important that the points raised are noted down and displayed for all to see, both as a check on accuracy and as a way of signalling that students' views are being taken seriously. The use of flip charts would provide you with a convenient record of the discussion.

Student Panels

The students who formally represent their peers at course or departmental meetings are not necessarily 'typical' or in a position to convey the variety of concerns to be found across an entire cohort or year-group. It can sometimes be helpful, therefore, to select a random sample of the students you teach to form an ad hoc feedback panel. This method of tapping a cross-section of student views is especially helpful for fleshing out questionnaire responses, finding out about what is working well and not so well, or sounding out what improvements could be made.[4]

The frequency of panel meetings and the number of students invited to participate can vary, depending on course size and what you are seeking from their feedback. For example, student panels may meet once a term with different groups of students invited to participate. Or, alternatively, a core group can be augmented each term.

COMBINING SOURCES AND METHODS

It is a well-established principle in research that, wherever possible, the data-collection strategy adopted should make provision for 'triangulation'; in other words, that information should be collected from more than one source, and/or by more than one method, to reduce the risk that any findings will be invalid or unreliable. Ideally, a similar precept would hold sway whenever teaching is reviewed, and as figure 2.3 shows, the range of sources and methods of feedback which might be used in combination with one another certainly provides abundant scope for cross-comparisons to be made. But what is sauce for the research goose is rarely a realistic option in the setting of day-to-day teaching practices, where resources of time, effort and expertise are much more tightly constrained and full-scale triangulation would generally be impractical.

It is possible, nonetheless, to sketch out a few rules-of-thumb which you might feasibly follow in reviewing teaching and which would offer some safeguards against skewed or biased findings:

- when devising a questionnaire, try to avoid only including questions or statements which call for fixed responses (e.g. by circling a number or ticking a box); offering some opportunity for open comment may bring to light reactions or impressions which you had not anticipated, but which clearly have a bearing on the effectiveness of your teaching
- similarly, when using open-ended pro formas, post-its or group discussions to obtain feedback, look for an approach that will enable you to check out the strength of perceptions and observations; i.e., establishing not only what precisely was felt or perceived, but by what proportion of the students, colleagues or peers who were asked to comment?
- for many purposes, relying solely on either incidental or self-generated feedback is unlikely to be secure: try therefore to combine feedback from one of these sources with feedback from students or from colleagues or peers whenever possible; (and if this is not feasible, be wary of embarking upon major modifications until the opportunity presents itself to look for corroborative evidence from elsewhere);
- similarly – and even when obtaining feedback from students or colleagues – if it rarely proves possible, on any given occasion, to tap into more

than one of these sources or to deploy more than one method, then try to achieve at least some degree of triangulation by varying your approach over an extended period of time.

Lastly, it is worth bearing in mind that trying to make varied use of sources and methods of feedback is not just a way of enhancing validity. It is also likely to prove more stimulating and more challenging to you and to those from whom you seek feedback. The dangers of 'questionnaire fatigue' – and the student disenchantment which can follow in its wake – are well-known. But the problem lies with neither the method nor the source of feedback: severe post-it, pro forma or colleague fatigue would be no less likely a consequence if used to excess.

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Chapter 3

Reviewing Lecturing

> The essential function of lectures is to place knowledge in a meaningful context. By his synthesis of different points of view, or textbook treatments; by his emphasis on essentials, and the extrapolation of basic principles; by the clarity with which he relates the parts of his exposition, a lecturer can enable the student to perceive the subject coherently. But, perhaps even more usefully, he can provide a more personal context, showing why the subject interests and excites him, how he has used it in his own experience, how it relates to problems whose importance his audience already understands. From this, the student can more easily imagine how he himself could use it: he develops his own context of motives for mastering a problem.[1]
>
> *Peter Marris*

INTRODUCTION

The continuing viability of lecturing has often been called into question. It was Samuel Johnson who famously set the pattern, declaring flatly that lectures were no longer necessary "since books are so numerous and all can read". Many others have followed in Johnson's footsteps, seeing the advent of a new technology as decisive, whether it be radio, television, programmed learning, film and video or, most recently of all, computer-based learning.

Yet as with Mark Twain's death, reports of the imminent demise of lecturing have been greatly exaggerated. It has withstood enormous advances in technologies for communicating information and ideas, in some cases by accommodating new audio-visual media within more versatile approaches to lecturing, in others by simply complementing technology-based approaches as part of an enlarged array of strategies for teaching and learning. Lecturing, moreover, continues to offer a flexible medium for mapping pathways through a complex field of study, and it helps provide – even where class sizes have risen sharply – a live demonstration of knowledge in action and a sense of belonging to a larger intellectual community. And despite evidence of its limitations as a vehicle for stimulating thought or changing attitudes, it has been shown to be an efficient and effective means of imparting information.[2]

But it is perhaps also precisely because it is such a hardy perennial of university teaching that lecturing is often taken for granted, especially once new academics have found their feet and have survived those difficult early years when a personal style of lecturing has to be forged at the same time as a portfolio of lectures is built from scratch. Yet expertise in lecturing can benefit from systematic review just as much in mid- or late career as it can at the apprenticeship stage. Indeed, as routines become well-polished and familiar, idiosyncrasies and mannerisms may intensify while there may be much less readiness to adapt to new techniques or to the needs of new kinds of students.

REVIEWING WHAT?

The starting-point for any review of lecturing is to consider which aspects of your lecturing might merit re-appraisal, using a suitably wide-ranging framework such as the twelve dimensions of lecturing expertise identified in figure 3.1, which is firmly grounded in past research findings and documented practice. Yet whether you choose to review your lecturing in the broadest possible way or to home in on particular key dimensions, no such framework can be regarded as a rigid blueprint and will need careful tailoring to suit individual circumstances.

One prime consideration is the nature of the discipline concerned. In some subject areas, for instance, great care has to be taken with the dimensions of ***structure*** and ***pace and timing*** if students are not to lose their way amongst a bewildering forest of competing theories or interpretations. In others, very extensive use of high-quality ***audio-visual aids*** may be indispensable, or the abundant ***use of examples*** vital if students are to grasp difficult ideas or see the interconnections between theory and practice.

KEY DIMENSIONS OF EXPERTISE IN LECTURING

1. **VENUE**
   - ensuring that venues are adequate - in terms of e.g. seating, lighting, heating, ventilation, audio-visual facilities, sightlines.
2. **CONTEXT**
   - making adequate information available to the students about the lecture course(s) as a whole
   - drawing sufficient links between this and previous lectures/other parts of the course/ textbooks/ study materials.
3. **STRUCTURE**
   - presenting the lecture material in a well-organised form, so that students can follow the structure or sequence adopted
   - signposting key points clearly.
4. **LEVEL**
   - pitching lectures at a level the students can cope with
   - making adequate provision for those who experience difficulties in following the lectures.
5. **CLARITY**
   - presenting lectures clearly
   - trying to ensure that the explanations given are readily understood by the students.
6. **USE OF EXAMPLES**
   - using examples or illustrations whenever helpful to students in grasping key points
   - generating examples likely to engage with students' knowledge and interests.
7. **HANDOUTS AND OTHER MATERIALS**
   - making appropriate use of handouts or other study materials
   - ensuring that these are helpful to the students in summarising, amplifying or reinforcing the lecture material.
8. **AUDIO-VISUAL AIDS**
   - using audio-visual aids wherever needed in conveying the subject-matter and so aiding students' understanding.
9. **AUDIBILITY**
   - ensuring that the presentation can be clearly heard, even by students at the back and sides of lecture theatres.
10. **PACE AND TIMING**
    - presenting the lecture material at an appropriate speed
    - keeping to time.
11. **ENTHUSIASM AND INTEREST**
    - presenting the material in a lively and enthusiastic way
    - seeking to sustain or enhance students' interest in the subject-matter.
12. **INTERACTION**
    - grasping opportunities to interact with students - e.g. by inviting questions or comments, or by drawing upon their interests, concerns or experiences.

Figure 3.1

A second consideration has to do with personal styles of lecturing. Some lecturers put a premium on maximising opportunities for ***interaction*** with students through questions or invitations to comment or discuss points raised, while others, particularly in the humanities, favour a predominantly oral style of lecturing which entails comparatively little use of the board, overhead projector or slides.[1] Equally, there are some lecturers who see lectures as above all else a powerful means of stimulating and motivating students, and who therefore see ***enthusiasm and interest*** as paramount.

Thirdly, there is the departmental and institutional setting. Questions of ***venue*** or ***audibility*** are unlikely to be high on the agenda if most of your lecturing is to moderately sized groups in well-equipped teaching rooms, but they will matter a great deal if you teach large classes in lecture theatres where acoustics, sightlines and even lighting are less than ideal. Similarly, ***level***

NEXT TIME I GIVE THIS LECTURE
Course:
Lecture:
When I gave this lecture, what seemed to go well was ...
And what didn't seem to go as well as I'd wish was ...
The next time I give this lecture
I should omit ...
I should change ...
I should add ...

Figure 3.2

may be a crucial dimension to consider if your students are drawn from very diverse backgrounds, while ***context*** is likely to be especially important in a course taught by many different lecturers and tutors, or one in which lectures, tutorials and practicals need to be carefully coordinated if students are not to lose the thread.

The onus is therefore on you to determine the relative importance of the various dimensions of lecturing expertise, as well as their particular significance in reviewing a lecture, a series of lectures, or your lecturing practice generally.

REVIEWING A LECTURE

Even if you are a very experienced lecturer, there will be occasions when it seems highly desirable to subject a particular lecture to systematic review: when past lectures on a specific topic, for instance, have never gone down as well as you had anticipated; when you are lecturing for the first time on a dauntingly difficult topic, or on one which, you suspect, students will view much less enthusiastically than usual.

Any lecture can be reviewed in a variety of ways. The most straightforward of these is to spend a little time collecting your thoughts while the lecture still remains fresh in your mind. What seemed to go well, what went less well than you had expected, and what could you do next time around to improve matters? You could jot down your reflections on post-it notes or use pro formas of the kind shown in figure 3.2 , 'Next Time I Give This Lecture' – but in either case filing them away carefully with your lecture notes so that they are easily to hand when you come to revise the lecture on a future occasion. You might also feel it would be useful to record the lecture in some way or other (on audio-cassette or perhaps on video) so that you can review it later at your leisure.

But whether or not you choose to record the lecture, you will probably gain a lot more if you involve an experienced colleague as well as generating your own feedback. One option is to invite your colleague to help you to preview or retrace the lecture, or perhaps to do both if he or she can spare the time and the importance of the lecture warrants the additional scrutiny entailed. Another option is for your colleague to sit in on the lecture itself (not viable if the group is small and his or her presence will be obtrusive) or to view the video-recording subsequently. In either case, good advance briefing is called for, i.e.:

- how does the lecture fit within the wider course setting?
- what do the students already know and understand about the topic concerned?
- what were you trying to achieve in this particular lecture?
- which aspects of the lecture would you most welcome feedback on?
- and would it be helpful if your colleague were to use an appropriate checklist or pro forma on lecture presentations?

As far as getting feedback from students is concerned, asking them to complete a conventional questionnaire (see Chapter 2) on a single lecture would be overtaxing their goodwill. But you could feasibly try using the last five minutes of a lecture to display an 'instant' questionnaire inviting students to jot down, say, the three most important

points raised, or two or three questions uppermost in their minds at the end of the lecture. You would then simply collect students' responses as they leave the lecture theatre and analyse them at your leisure. Other options would be to ask a small sample of students for permission to look at their notes on that lecture, or invite three or four of them to review the lecture informally with you afterwards over a cup of coffee.

The students who make up the audience for your lecture can also provide a source of incidental feedback, albeit indirectly. When the lecture is being delivered, how attentive are they? At given points in the presentation, how many display signs of boredom, fidgeting, puzzlement, distraction or a disinclination to take notes? Interested audiences, by contrast:

> usually sit with their heads slightly forward and their eyes wide open. They look toward the lecturer. Some of them *will exchange glances of approval – for the lecturer, not* each other – and some will be smiling and nodding agreement. A few will lean forward, draw in breath and open their mouths as if they want to speak.[4]

REVIEWING LECTURING AGREEMENT

The giving and receiving of feedback will be constructive and confidential. Each of us agrees not to divulge any feedback information to any person without the express consent of the other.

....

(signature of the lecturer seeking feedback) (signature of the colleague offering feedback)

Course details

Title and level: .....

Number and type of students enrolled (e.g. other subjects studies, this course required or optional):

.....

.....

Lectures: days and times of the week .....

venue .....

Other sessions: (e.g. practicals) .....

Review details

Date(s) of lecture(s) to be observed .....

Arrangements for feedback and discussion (e.g. verbal and/or written comments, time and place):

.....

.....

Preparation and groupwork

Course materials to be supplied beforehand? course booklet
lecture handouts
other documentation .....
.....

Verbal briefing concerning the context of the lectures? when? .....
.....

Identification of particular areas of concern? what? .....
.....

Figure 3.3

FEEDBACK ON A SERIES OF LECTURES

To what extent would you agree that the lectures:-

	a lot	a little	not at all
formed a well-linked series			
were consistent in their quality			
gave a good overview			
were clearly audible			
helped you to understand new material			
were delivered in a lively way			
covered the necessary ground efficiently			
provided lots to think about			
each had a clear structure			
seemed to have been well-prepared			
stimulated your interest in particular topics			
held your attention most of the time			
made note-taking easy and productive			
offered some variety in presentation/format			
made effective use of visual aids (blackboard, OHPs)			
supplied telling illustrative examples			
provided useful handouts			
related well to what you already knew			
established good rapport with students			

Figure 3.4

You can try to be alert to these various 'non-verbal' cues, but it may be hard to do so systematically without losing the thread of your lecture material. Keeping a watchful eye on students' levels of attentiveness could therefore be one of the tasks you ask a colleague who will sit in your lecture to undertake.

REVIEWING A SERIES OF LECTURES

There are times when reviewing a single lecture will not suffice: the focus needs to be the wider one of a series of lectures, each of which knits together as part of an integrated whole. The lecture series concerned might, for instance:

- be on an entirely new topic;
- deal with a well-established topic on which you have just carried out an extensive revision of your lecture material;
- cover a familiar topic which you are about to tackle from a fresh angle – by greater use of buzz groups or worked examples, say, or by relying on fuller handouts in a revamped format.

Once again, while it is important to nourish and record your own reflections with each succeeding lecture, involving a colleague will add to the benefits which can be derived. Since these benefits have to be weighed against extra costs in terms of much greater calls on your colleague's time and effort, it will not be enough simply to rely on careful advance briefing. One possibility hinges on reciprocation: the feedback you get from your colleague is matched by feedback from you on a series of lectures he or she is keen to review. But the precise details will nonetheless have to be talked through and agreed. What combination of previewing, reviewing and observation seems appropriate – and will be feasible given pressures of time? Will each lecture be looked at in turn, or will the focus be the series as a whole or a sub-sample of lectures? Will feedback be communicated in written form, via a checklist or pro forma, or through informal discussion? These are not necessarily easy questions to resolve, and drawing up an outline agreement of the kind shown in figure 3.3 has obvious advantages.

SURVEYING STUDENTS' BACKGROUNDS: AN EXAMPLE

Answers to these questions will help show whether different groups of students vary in their reaction to this series of lectures.

Age: under 21 over 21 Gender: male female

Year at University: 1 2 3 4 5 more than 5

Background qualifications: SCE 'H' | H+ SYS | GCE 'A' | mix of SCE/GCE | Access Course | other *please specify*: .....

Is this course: the main subject of your degree (incl. joint hons.) | a compulsory but subsidiary part of your degree | an optional 'outside' course | other *please specify*: ....

Proportion of lectures attended: almost all | more than half | less than half

How are you doing on the course? very well | fine | not so well

Figure 3.5

And what of feedback from students? Where the focus is on a significant series of lectures, a good case can be made for looking for more than incidental feedback. If the opportunity arises, you could spend a little time with two or three tutorial groups in canvassing your tutees' views of the lecture series, concentrating particularly on how well it seemed to hang together. However, if it is preferable to sound out the views of everyone in a large and perhaps very diverse class, a questionnaire (see figure 3.4 for an example) might be the best option, but it should include some way of tapping into students' backgrounds if there is a likelihood that different kinds of students will respond in characteristically different ways. Figure 3.5 offers a good illustration of how this might be achieved without breaching confidentiality.

Incidental feedback also has a useful part to play in reviewing a series of lectures. Two possible sources of such feedback are:

- the coursework assignments or exam questions students opt for most: what does the pattern of take-up reveal about the topics covered in this series of lectures, compared to other topics dealt with in the course as a whole?
- signs of how well students have understood the lecture material (or have been able to relate it to what they learned in the accompanying tutorials or practicals), as revealed in their answers to particular test or exam questions or coursework assignments.

REVIEWING LECTURING

The widest focus of all is on your lecturing practice generally. You may for example simply want to take stock of your lecturing expertise at a particular point in your career, or you might perhaps want to take fresh soundings because you feel that your approach to lecturing is in danger of settling too firmly into a well-ploughed furrow.

In either case, we would suggest, it is best not to rush into getting feedback from students or colleagues. Rather than relying only on the views of others, you could first try to identify what you

yourself see as your strengths and weaknesses as a lecturer: what do you think you do well, and what would you like to be able to do a little better? This is quite a formidable challenge, even if it is something you have already attempted on some past occasion, and working from a blank sheet makes it especially difficult. Instead, you might try using a checklist to focus and organise your thoughts. Conventional checklists often seem unrewarding because they invite simplistic yes/no answers to a set menu of questions, but as figure 3.6 suggests, they can take more flexible and open-ended forms whilst also spanning an appropriately broad spectrum of dimensions of lecturing expertise of the kind considered in the opening part of this chapter.

Once you have gained a clearer view of your lecturing expertise as you perceive it, you are well-placed to explore how well your own perceptions match with those of your colleagues and your students. They too could be invited to complete the checklist, or you could instead try a blend of some of the methods already outlined above, providing that you sample from across the range of your lecturing responsibilities to reflect the breadth of topics covered and the variety of students you teach, at undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

ENHANCING YOUR LECTURING

Following a review of a one-off lecture or a series of lectures, there are in all likelihood going to be highly specific issues you need to attend to – revamping a slightly fuzzy introduction, for example, or incorporating more (or more telling) examples that will help to communicate that lecture material more effectively. But whether or not you also chose to review your lecturing practice generally at the same time, there may well be implications of a more general kind arising from a close look at one or more particular lectures. One important task is therefore to pinpoint these wider implications and to reflect on how best they might be addressed.

If your review shows that ***venue*** or ***context*** needs attention, all that is usually required is more thorough groundwork, allied perhaps to closer

AN EXTRACT FROM A PRO FORMA

points clearly signposted?	

4. LEVEL

Are my lectures pitched at a level the students can cope with? What provision do I make for those who experience difficulties in following my lectures?	*Comments:*

5. CLARITY

Are my lectures clearly presented? Are the explanations given readily understood by the students?	*Comments:*

6. USE OF EXAMPLES

Do I use examples or illustrations whenever helpful to students in grasping	*Comments:*

Figure 3.6

liaison with course team colleagues (in the case of ***context***) or a briefing from audio-visual technicians (in the case of ***venue***) on how to make the most of the facilities available in the lecture theatres you habitually use. Difficulties with ***audibility*** too can often benefit from technical support: in some of the larger lecture theatres, using a microphone and amplification is sometimes the only way even lecturers with superb diction and good voice projection can be certain of making themselves heard. And if public-address facilities are not readily available, an alternative is *less* exclusive reliance on oral communication. Look instead at ways of making better use of handouts and audio-visual aids to ensure that you get your message across securely.

If on the other hand ***structure*** emerges from the review as an aspect of your lecturing which requires attention, the best course of action is probably going to be close study of George Brown's *Lecturing and Explaining*,[5] which helpfully combines a discussion of different ways of structuring lectures with extracts from illustrative lecture transcripts. A similar strategy applies to ***interaction***, where consulting a book such as *53 Interesting Things to Do in Your Lectures* can be a fast and enjoyable way of familiarising yourself with some of the most up-to-date techniques.[6]

An equally tricky set of dimensions are those of ***clarity, level*** and ***pace and timing***. No matter how experienced you are as a lecturer, these are hard to get consistently right because they are so directly bound up with the evolving needs of particular cohorts of students, and what may be just the right level or pace of delivery with one group might not suit another half so well. One course of action would entail closer monitoring of your own performance, either by encouraging students to be more assertive in pointing out when you are lecturing at too rapid a pace, say, or by taking regular soundings from one of the tutorial groups. Another could be to enlist the help of a course team colleague whose feedback from the students on these dimensions has been much more positive.

Colleagues are of course a good source of guidance and support on almost any aspect of lecturing expertise, but they can sometimes have a very specific and crucial role to play as 'exemplars' or models of good practice. This might be helpful where you are keen to strengthen your ***use of examples*** or of ***handouts***, but it is virtually the only practicable strategy in the case of that most elusive of all dimensions, the stimulation of ***enthusiasm and interest***, where there is no substitute for a live demonstration of lecturing expertise.

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SEE ALSO

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Chapter 4

Reviewing Group-Based Learning

> [Professor Cullen] saw that a science like Chemistry was not to be taught by mere lectures, but that there must be a free and unreserved communication between the teacher and the taught. He cultivated the personal acquaintance of his pupils, and zealously aided them to overcome those difficulties which we all experience in ascending the first steps of the ladder of knowledge. He taught Professors of Chemistry to act as tutors as well as prelectors.[1]
>
> *Lyon Playfair*

INTRODUCTION

Over-indulgence in lectures, Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch once observed, is a "primrose path to intellectual sloth", and both in Scotland and elsewhere in Britain, higher education has long been wedded to an approach to teaching which blends lectures with opportunities for students to discuss ideas and test out their understanding in tutorials and seminars. Indeed, this commitment to various forms of group-based learning and teaching has been sustained despite the much larger student enrolments and shrinking resources which have characterised higher education in the 1990s. [2]

This in turn has meant that, inevitably, typical group sizes (which have always varied across disciplines and between institutions) are nowadays generally higher than they were a decade earlier, or perhaps that classes which once met on a weekly basis now do so at fortnightly intervals. A further consequence has been greater attention to – and wider variation in – strategies for conducting seminars, tutorials and other forms of group work. When groups were smaller, more close-knit and less diverse, relatively informal tutoring styles could be appropriately used and to good effect, in order to pursue the fundamental twin goals of 'taking out' and 'drawing in', i.e.:

> *taking out* an expert view of a subject to students in terms that novices are likely to understand and *drawing in* students' more common sense understandings towards expert positions within the discipline.[3]

But a changed climate has necessitated the adoption of more structured approaches: the setting of carefully designed tasks and activities which entail much more than an invitation to discuss topic *x* or theme *y*; and the widespread use of a variety of techniques to promote interaction within and across the group as a whole. [4] In consequence, though we continue to cling to terms such as 'tutorial' (as in this chapter) or 'seminar' for ease of reference, nowadays these give little indication in themselves of the kinds of group-based learning activities taking place in a given course or programme of study, which might take the form of workshops, problem-solving groupwork, case studies and simulations, role play, or a series of presentations by students. Equally importantly, as students' ability to work in groups and teams has come to be prized as a desirable 'transferable' skill, so has there been much greater emphasis on encouraging students to work in largely self-directed groups (i.e. with the minimum of hands-on control by the tutor). In such instances the consequence, inevitably, is to diminish the role of some face-to-face teaching skills whilst at the same time calling for increased expertise in setting-up, monitoring and evaluating group-based learning activities.

REVIEWING WHAT?

These far-reaching changes, it hardly needs saying, have implications for feedback and evaluation. Though there are many worthwhile examples to be found of resource materials for evaluating group-based learning, each may need much more adaptation and tailoring than is generally the case for similar materials on lecturing, where there is greater commonality of approach. A crucial first step is therefore to consider the distinctive characteristics of your own particular approach to group-based learning and teaching.

APPROACHES TO GROUP-BASED TEACHING AND LEARNING[5]

Approach	Possible Strengths	Possible Limitations
STRUCTURED DISCUSSION Discussion follows a series of steps or stages in response to a stimulus provided by the tutor.	• Offers a secure framework for discussion, with set tasks and clear ground-rules • Encourages students to work from and with own ideas • Gives tutor rich feedback on quality of students' learning	• Can fail to engage student if focus unclear or structure not robust enough • Calls for particular expertise and sensitivity to processes • Hard to do well if accommodation is inappropriate
PROBLEM-SOLVING Students work on problems set by the tutor, individually and in groups.	• Promotes the development of problem-solving and critical thinking skills • Motivation enhanced by personal focus for learning and scope for tackling problems imaginatively • Unlimited scope for developing novel problems (as motivators) • Students learn from and with one another but can call on tutor when 'stuck'	• Calls for great skill from tutor in judging when and when not to intervene • Often works best when problems don't all have right answers or require more than applying routine procedures • Students can become disheartened or over-reliant on others if problems too demanding
CASE STUDIES AND SIMULATIONS A documented issue or situation is analysed and possible solutions or strategies are proposed or piloted.	• Encourages students to draw on and apply different bodies or areas of knowledge • Opportunity to relate theories to practice (and to appreciate the complexity of problems of everyday settings) • Relatively risk-free for tutors to manage (grounded in data)	• Time-consuming to prepare material that is challenging but not voluminous • Often calls for careful groundwork by students if class time is to be used productively • Closing stages in particular make exacting demands on tutor's leading and chairing skills
ROLE PLAY Students play or act out specific roles or perspectives in addressing an issue, problem or situation.	• Directly addresses inter-personal skills and attitudes • Can be highly involving and a strong spur to motivation • Develops first-hand appreciation of competing perspectives and standpoints	• Can be very stressful and unsettling for some students • Form can take precedence over substance if theatrical possibilities overemphasised • Requires very careful thinking by tutor about how he/she will organise and direct sessions
STUDENT PRESENTATION OR SEMINAR Presentation(s) by student(s) serve as stimulus for group discussion.	• Encourages student-led exploration of a theme in depth • Opportunity for students to test out thoughts and ideas and discuss these in a group setting • Develops presentation and other communication skills	• Requires guidance to students about presenting effectively (incl. use of visual aids and handouts) • Success depends on some preparation and contribution by everyone • Dialogue confined to tutor and presenter unless ground-rules clarified
TUTORLESS OR STUDENT-LED GROUPS Students convene without the tutor being present, but usually to work to a set or agreed framework.	• Helps students to acquire skills in teamwork, self-direction and group leadership • Students who are normally silent can feel less inhibited about actively contributing • Some evidence that the overall quality of students' contributions is enhanced	• Unless group is very experienced, requires a framework set by the tutor and/or agreed by and with the students • Tutor's sense of how well the group is progressing is at second hand • Can be hard for students to restrain vociferous or over-assertive fellow-students

Figure 4.1

Figure 4.1 provides one pathway to doing this systematically, for it not only outlines a range of widely used approaches but also identifies their potential strengths and limitations; and it is these strengths and limitations – where you judge them relevant to your own teaching goals and practices – that will need to be addressed in any review strategy, if it is to succeed in capturing the impact on student learning of the approach chosen. For example, if your aim is to review tutorials which you focus around the use of case studies or simulations, it will be essential to try to establish how far these have succeeded in encouraging students to apply different areas of knowledge they have already acquired, and to relate theory and practice. At the same time, you might want to explore how much careful advance groundwork by students was necessary for them to derive the maximum benefit from a case-based approach.

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Another pathway involves working from a map of the core domains of expertise in group-based learning and teaching. Figure 4.2, perhaps rashly, is an attempt at drawing up just this kind of map, and like all such resource materials, should be used as something to explore with and think from rather than as a fail-safe navigation chart. Some of the dimensions represented – most obviously those of ***listening***, ***questioning***, ***explaining*** and ***clarifying*** – would doubtless have been just as relevant to undergraduate tutors a decade or two ago as they are today, nor would they necessarily seem out of place if applied to postgraduate research seminars, the archetypal Oxbridge tutorial, or the catechetical 'meetings in-committee' which were such a distinctive feature of Scottish higher education in the nineteenth century.[6] What has changed a great deal, however, is the *relative* importance of some dimensions.

KEY DIMENSIONS OF GROUP-BASED LEARNING[5]

1. VENUE AND CLIMATE

Checking that venues are suitable in terms of heating, lighting, etc.

Trying to establish a congenial atmosphere in which students' viewpoints and experiences are valued

2. AIMS AND PURPOSES

Making sure that students understand:

- the aims of the session(s)
- how these relate to other parts of their course
- what they can expect to achieve from the session

3. GROUND RULES

Clarifying:

- what is expected of students by way of preparation
- when it is appropriate to raise or respond to question, or to challenge points made by others
- what the role of the tutor/group leader is

4. PLANNING TASKS

Devising tasks which:

- are appropriate to the aims of the session(s)
- offer an appropriate variety of learning experiences
- are preceded by adequate briefing and guidance where appropriate (e.g. when students are required to make presentations to the group)

5. STRUCTURING AND SEQUENCING TASKS

Ensuring that, where appropriate:

- there are tasks early in the session(s) which enable all to be involved
- the outcomes from one task lead into another
- realistic time allocations for tasks are set and kept

6. LISTENING

Being attentive to what is said by each member of the group

Displaying a readiness to listen, as reflected both through verbal responses and body language

7. QUESTIONING

Making use of a variety of questioning strategies (e.g. open, closed and reflective questions)

Deploying these questioning strategies sensitively and flexibly

8. EXPLAINING AND CLARIFYING

Giving students space to attempt tasks or problems before giving own explanations

Being clear and succinct in own explanations

Building students' ideas into own explanations when given

9. ENCOURAGING PARTICIPATION

Encouraging all students in the group to contribute/to talk to each other as well as to the tutor

Avoiding too dominant a role

Intervening appropriately, (e.g. to restrain the vociferous, encourage the silent, defuse conflict, refocus on the topic)

10. RESPONDING TO STUDENTS AS INDIVIDUALS

Addressing students by their preferred names

Showing sensitivity to students as individuals (i.e. taking into account their backgrounds and prior knowledge)

Providing constructive feedback to students who have made presentations to the group

11. CLOSING

Making provision for:

- summing up what has been achieved
- establishing what might be necessary to follow up the session and consolidate what has been learnt

12. MONITORING AND EVALUATION

Monitoring what is going well in the sessions and what might be improved

Providing opportunities for the group to review its overall effectiveness

Evaluating the quality of work produced by individuals within the group or by the group as a whole (e.g. oral or poster presentations or written reports)

Figure 4.2

Establishing a congenial ***venue and climate*** could once be thought of as a relatively routine matter, especially when tutorial and seminar groups could comfortably be accommodated within the tutor's own office and the smaller group sizes made it easier for students to feel at ease in one another's company. Nowadays, however, appropriate venues can be much harder to find, and a special effort sometimes has to be made to overcome the constrictions of space and room layouts and to help a larger and more diverse group of students feel at ease.

Similar considerations apply to other dimensions, for the advent of larger groups has meant that less can simply be taken-as-read: contemporary notions of 'good practice' in group-based learning call for ***aims and purposes*** to be clearly communicated to students and for the ***ground rules*** to be spelt out which will govern how groups act and interact.[7] Greater transparency of approach is usually achieved through a combination of course documentation and oral briefings, within as well as prior to tutorial meetings. Some dimensions – and particularly those of ***encouraging participation*** and ***responding to students as individuals*** – put an even greater premium on the tutor's expertise in situ. Challenging in themselves, these dimensions take on additional significance when groups are typically much more diverse as well as larger than hitherto, since the students concerned are likely to be drawn from a much wider range of backgrounds in terms of age, subject knowledge, previous experience and perhaps too in their academic and vocational aspirations. Without skilled interventions by the tutor, the less talkative students may find it easier to lie low and participate as little as possible, while even those who are more instinctively confident contributors can feel inhibited if no effort is made to address students by name, or if there is little understanding of individuals' concerns and interests.

Some very fleet-footed tutors find that they can rise to these challenges in a relatively impromptu way, through adroit management of the processes of discussion and interaction, but most prefer the less hazardous option of careful groundwork which focuses on both ***planning*** and ***structuring and sequencing tasks***. This involves careful attention to the kinds of activities (collating thoughts and ideas on a topic, addressing a set of questions or problems, reviewing case notes, arriving at an agreed position) students will be asked to engage in, and the accompanying handouts or other resource materials which they will work from.

Finally, as with any such framework, careful tailoring is necessary to match the various domains, and their relative importance, to the requirements of your discipline, your personal style, and the techniques of group-based learning you use with your students.

REVIEWING A TUTORIAL

Tutorials, seminars and other forms of group-based learning can be notoriously fickle, and running the same tutorial two, three or more times in the same week – as current workloads often demand – throws this into sharp relief. What seemed to fizz and sparkle with one group only stuttered along with another and seemed to die a death with a third, even though, perplexingly, you had tried to take the same approach and use the same materials in each. And tempting though it may be simply to write such experiences off to fate, chance or the vagaries of student interaction, a particular tutorial may occupy such a pivotal place in a given course that you will be keen to take extra steps to maximise the likelihood that it will go well.

There are various ways of going about this, the most obvious of which is to preview or retrace the tutorial with a colleague – an especially useful option since, with the possible exception of a senior honours or postgraduate seminar, it is unlikely that a colleague could sit-in and observe a group at work without being an obtrusive (and probably distorting) presence. And though modern video-recording equipment is compact and does not need additional lighting, it too is likely to be an unwelcome intruder, inhibiting some students from contributing as freely as they normally would and prompting others to play to the camera. It also necessitates specialist technical support and guidance and is best avoided where facilities are cramped.[8]

But previewing or retracing with the help of a colleague can achieve a great deal with rather less effort, provided that it is not rushed, for a large expanse of terrain may need to be covered, including:

- what preparatory work needed to be undertaken by you, and by the students concerned;
- what materials were being used as a discussion stimulus or trigger;
- how the tutorial or seminar was to begin or be introduced;
- the structure or sequence it would then follow;

- how the tutorial would conclude;
- what follow-up activities (if any) were called for.

You could also opt to review the tutorial alone, perhaps with the aid of the kind of pro forma shown in figure 4.3, which is quickly filled in and can be easily adapted to fit a particular approach to group-based learning. In some cases, comparing your self-ratings across, say, three different tutorial groups may be enough to help pinpoint the factors which led to differing degrees of success across the groups. In other cases where the contributory factors prove to be elusive, the much more open-ended pro forma shown in figure 4.4. might yield better results. Moreover, either pro forma could be used in situations where responsibility for conducting a tutorial is delegated to postgraduates and other part-time tutors, and your main role is a supervisory one: planning tutorial activities and ensuring that each of the tutorial groups is running smoothly.

TUTORING: A SELF-MONITORING CHECKLIST

Record by means of a tick (✓) in the appropriate column the comments which come closest to your opinion.

How well did I ...?	well	satisfactorily	not very well
get the tutorial underway (establish links, aims, etc.)			
sequence and progress the tutorial task(s)			
ask questions and prompt students			
involve all members of the tutorial group			
handle students' questions and comments			
respond to students as individuals			
keep the focus on the main topic(s)			
help sustain students' interest			
ensure that key points were drawn out			
bring things to a close and indicate preparation task(s)			

Figure 4.3

REFLECTIONS ON A TUTORIAL

SUCCESSES

What were the most successful features of the tutorial?

What helped make them a success, do you think?

DIFFICULTIES

What proved difficult, or did not succeed as well you would have wished?

Why do you think this was the case?

CHANGES

What changes would you like to introduce, next time you run this tutorial?

And how do you think they might help to make the tutorial more effective?

Figure 4.4

There is of course a good case, too, for consulting the students themselves, providing that this can be done in a way that is not time-consuming but also displays tact and sensitivity. The risk, particularly with younger students or those who are still getting used to your tutorial style, is that your invitation to provide feedback might be misread as a signal that any shortcomings are attributable to them. With a well-settled and more senior group of tutees, on the other hand, it may be easier to follow an approach in which it is routine to round off a tutorial with a brief discussion of its effectiveness.

REVIEWING A SERIES OF TUTORIALS

In practice, you are more likely to be reviewing a programme of tutorials in their entirety rather than a single session, and there are well-established strategies for doing this by collecting information from students. Figure 4.5 illustrates one common

A TUTORIAL QUESTIONNAIRE

Please put a tick in the appropriate box to indicate your response to each of the following statements about the tutorials you attended as part of the course. Thank you very much.

	strongly agree	*agree*	*unsure*	*disagree*	*strongly disagree*
The tutorials					
• covered key areas and ideas					
• were well linked to lectures					
• were well-planned and structured					
• encouraged students to prepare properly					
• were lively and stimulating					
The tutor					
• helped students with any difficulties they encountered					
• was interested in students and their progress					
• recognised that student differ in their needs, concerns and interests					
• acted as an effective group leader					
As a student					
• I looked forward to the tutorials					
• I enjoyed being in the tutorials					
• I learned a lot from the tutorials					

Please add below any comments about what would have made the tutorials better for you:

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Figure 4.5

strategy, the use of a questionnaire. This particular example is distinctive in inviting responses from the three standpoints of the tutorials, the tutor, and the students. A second – and rather more conventional – example is given in figure 4.6, which in its opening questions gives greater prominence to an issue where student feedback is often especially keenly sought: the contribution played by the tutorials in relation to other elements of the course such as course materials, practicals or (as here) the lectures.

Yet while these or similar off-the-shelf questionnaires can offer a fast and convenient route to feedback, they tend to assume a uniformity of approach to tutorial teaching which, as we noted

FEEDBACK ON TUTORIALS

Your Tutor's Name .....

Please put a tick in the appropriate box to indicate your response. Thank you very much.

	strongly agree	*agree*	*unsure*	*disagree*	*strongly disagree*
1. Overall the tutorials were a valuable contribution to my learning.					
2. The work of the tutorials was well co-ordinated with the main course material.					
3. I found my difficulties with the lecture material were ironed out in tutorials.					
4. I was encouraged to take an active part in tutorials.					
5. The tutorials have given me confidence in contributing to discussions.					

	very heavy	*quite heavy*	*about right*	*quite light*	*very light*
6. The workload involved in preparing for tutorials was...					

	more often	*no change*	*less often*
7. I would have liked the tutorials to occur...			

	smaller	*no change*	*bigger*
8. I would prefer the tutorial groups to be...			

Please use the space below to expand on any of your answers above, and to set out any other changes you would suggest to improve the tutorials.

Figure 4.6

earlier, can no longer be taken for granted. And although they may yield a useful broad-brush impression of whether things are running smoothly or not, they are unlikely to provide the kind of well-focussed feedback that could reliably guide your efforts to map out new directions or to hone a new approach to group-based learning which you do not yet feel you have adequately mastered.

In these circumstances, more open-ended methods of collecting feedback are likely to be more productive. You could, for instance, try continue/stop/start/'post-its' (see p.63) or a straightforward pro forma which simply invited students to identify what they found most and least rewarding about the group-based activities and what improvements they would want to suggest. A somewhat different tack would be one more directly aligned with the particular approach you had chosen to adopt. For example, if you were following one of the approaches outlined earlier in figure 4.1, you could focus the questions around the possible strengths and limitations identified in the figure. You might therefore ask students to consider to what extent each of the relevant potential strengths had been capitalised upon, and whether each had had a noticeable impact on what they were able to learn. Conversely, you could ask the students to what extent the matching limitations had been in evidence, or were a significant constraint on their learning.

An especially demanding as well as unfamiliar approach to group-based learning may also benefit from input from appropriately experienced academic or professional peers, since there are palpable limits on students' capacity to offer well-targeted feedback on, say, the effectiveness of simulations or role play when the approach concerned is as novel a one for them as it is for you. A colleague with specialist expertise may be much better placed to offer insights and suggest practical improvements.

TROUBLE-SHOOTING

There can be few veterans of the university teaching profession who have not at some point in their career found themselves stumped by a particular group of students who seem immune to all the wiles and stratagems that a hard-bitten tutor can muster. Indeed, sometimes there may be no realistic option open to a tutor other than to recognise that 'I did all I could'. There are nonetheless occasions when some prompt troubleshooting can succeed in addressing difficulties before they have time to become too firmly rooted. Problems such as consistent failure to undertake set preparatory work, an ostensible unreadiness or unwillingness to contribute to discussion (or its converse, over-talkativeness and the frequent interruption of others in mid-flow) are a case in point.[37] What may initially be confined to a minority of the group can soon spread to everyone if it goes unchecked. 'Why should I prepare or contribute', the more active of the students start to think, 'when no-one else seems to bother?'.

It can be difficult to make headway on problems of this kind because, while it seems essential to explore with the group what the underlying reasons are, broaching the issue in open discussion may not be feasible if students feel too shy, embarrassed or anxious to air their real concerns. Structured group discussion (see pp.10-12), allied to a suitable pro forma, can sometimes offer a way forward if it enables individuals to express their feelings without fear of being singled out. Figure 4.7 provides an example of one such pro forma, in this instance used with a first-year class to address the issue of why so few students felt ready or able to contribute to tutorial discussions.

DEVELOPING STUDENTS' SKILLS

The last decade has seen a heightened interest in fostering students' personal and transferable skills – the kinds of skills and competences which, though acquired or sharpened in one course setting, can be deployed again not only in other course settings but also beyond graduation, in the workplace. And, not surprisingly, tutorials and other forms of group-based learning are widely viewed as arenas in which many of these skills (communication, group- and teamwork, problem-solving, amongst many others) can vigorously blossom and flourish. In consequence, trying to ascertain the extent to which the most important of these skills have actually been enhanced has become integral to the review of tutorial effectiveness, and seeking student feedback is likely to offer the richest scope for insights.

Sometimes this can be achieved simply by adding a few items to an established tutorial questionnaire, perhaps combined in appropriate cases with scrutiny of whatever aspects of students' completed assignment work might best throw light on the skills practised and displayed. But there may also be occasions when an exclusive focus on skills would make a refreshing change from more conventional tutorial feedback – or indeed, that sharply focusing the feedback in this way may be essential in getting

TAKING PART IN TUTORIALS[1]

ME PERSONALLY

No, not at all	To some extent	Strongly

OTHER STUDENTS IN THIS GROUP

Hardly any students	Some students	Most students

1. The problem's not being sure what's supposed to happen in a tutorial -what the "rules" really are.
2. It just seems pointless when not many students have put enough effort into preparing for it.
3. It isn't clear what tutors are actually expecting in the way of preparation.
4. You can't help feeling it's not really a discussion, because tutors see it as a way of checking up on what you know.
5. What's off-putting is the pretence that you're there on equal terms - when it comes down to it, the tutor's the boss.
6. It takes guts to speak up when you might get shot down in flames. You don't want to look stupid.
7. You feel inhibited about contributing to the discussion ... because tutors know so much more than you.
8. You feel inhibited about contributing to the discussion ... because tutors are such hot-shots at arguing their own case.
9. It's difficult to get a word in edgeways ... because the tutor monopolises the discussion.
10. It's difficult to get a word in edgeways ... because some students are so fond of pitching in.
11. There's no need to say anything. You can get just as much out of it by listening.
12. The discussion's always jumping about - by the time you've thought through what you'd like to say, it's moved on to something else.

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Figure 4.7

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

FEEDBACK ON SKILLS DEVELOPED IN TUTORIALS

A key aim of the tutorials has been to give you opportunities to develop your communication and teamwork skills. As described in the Course Handbook, these skills include:

Communication Skills

- listening, questioning and explaining
- presenting and defending a position
- giving and getting feedback

Teamwork Skills

- setting and allocating roles and tasks
- managing time and resources
- encouraging and supporting other team members
- directing and leading the team

We would welcome your comments below on how far the tutorials have succeeded in promoting these skills.

Which of these skills have the tutorials most helped you to develop?	Which of these skills have the tutorials been least helpful in developing?
In what ways have the tutorials been particularly helpful in developing these skills?	Can you suggest changes to the tutorials that might help to develop these skills more effectively?

Figure 4.8

to grips with a type of learning outcome that is often hard to pin down. For the same reasons, an approach which invites open-ended comments may be more productive than a fixed-response questionnaire. Figure 4.8 offers an illustration of a pro forma designed with this purpose in mind. The pro forma can simply be handed in by students once they have completed it, or it could be a preliminary to open discussion within and across tutorial groups.

TAKING A BACK SEAT?

Figure 4.9 is also a pro forma, but for use in a rather different way than those presented earlier. It is designed to help in reviewing the work of groups in which each member is expected to play an active part in the work of the group and to contribute significantly to its effectiveness. And since, in this particular instance, the group was expected to work largely on its own initiative and independently of the tutor, all of the students in the group were invited to complete the pro forma, which they then used as the basis for a collaborative review of the group's effectiveness up to that point in time.

The use of pro formas of this kind is becoming increasingly commonplace in higher education, and for a variety of purposes.[17] They can have – as in this case – an essentially formative function, by enabling the students to reflect on how well they have functioned as a group, and to begin to identify ways in which they might improve their performance as a group. And in appropriate cases, such pro formas can even take on a summative function (i.e. in contributing towards the determination of a group mark or grade). But their growing adoption raises an intriguing question. Where does the onus lie for feedback and review, if the responsibilities conducting and running group-based learning activities are to a greater or lesser degree shared between tutor and students? The answer must surely be that this is also a shared task rather than the sole responsibility of the tutor – and all the more so when the activities are specifically intended to help students become adept at groupwork.

HOW ARE WE DOING SO FAR?

what we've managed to do fairly well so far		what we still need to work at
	allocating everyone specific jobs, tasks or responsibilities	
	sorting out a programme, schedule of work or deadlines to aim at	
	sorting out what standards we'll try to reach	
	making sure everyone has their fair say	
	making sure that everyone gets a fair hearing	
	making sure that everyone does their fair share	
	keeping an eye on our progress as a group	
	lending a hand when someone runs into difficulties	
	consulting the tutor when we find we just can't sort something out for ourselves	
	sticking to the deadlines we've set for one another	
	checking that things we've done are up to standard	

Figure 4.9

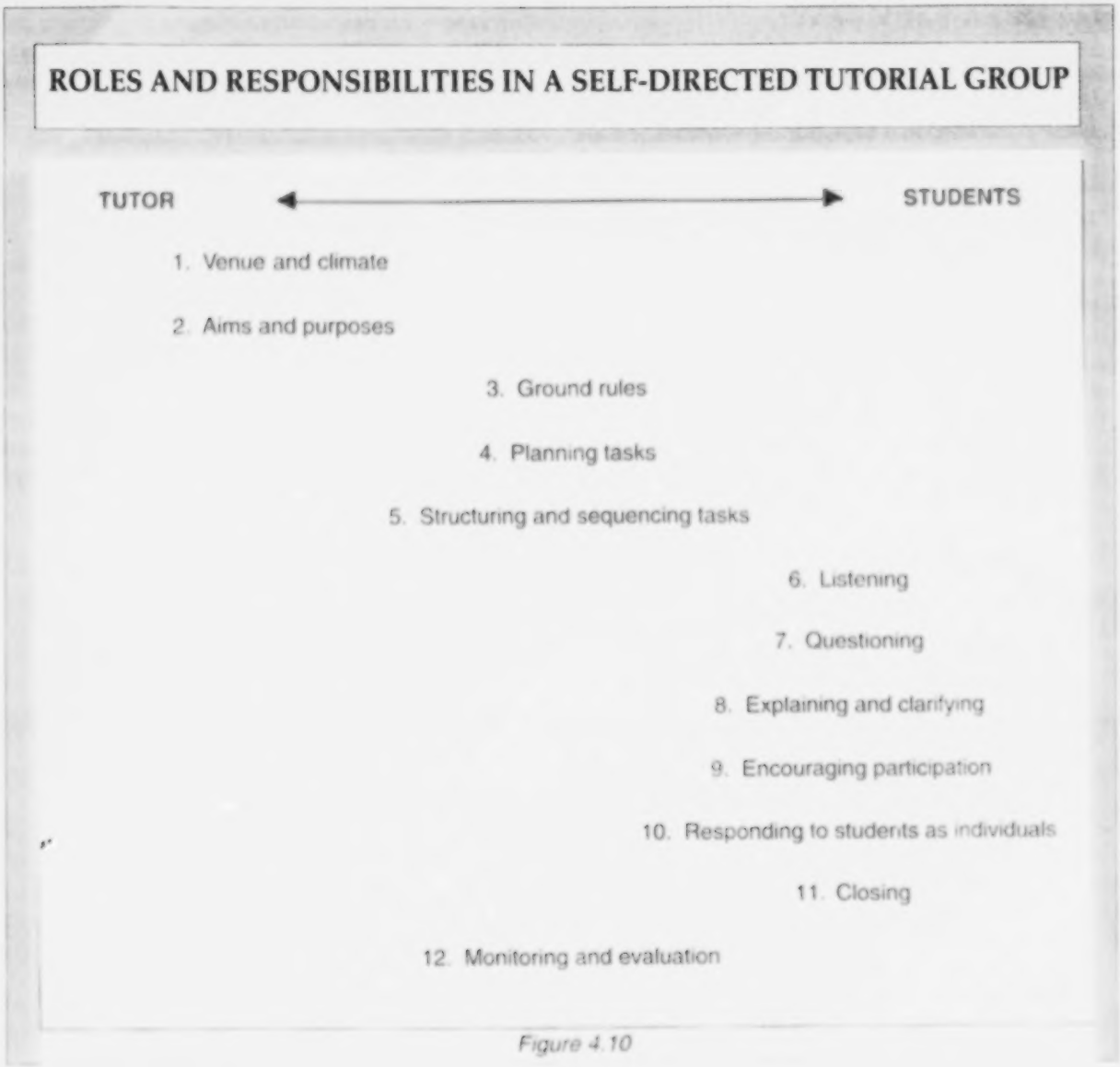

Figure 4.10

Precisely how this responsibility for feedback and review is to be allocated will vary, however, according to the form which group-based learning takes in a given setting and the respective roles assumed by tutor and students. Equally, the structure and content of the pro formas – or whatever other kinds of review materials are to be used in such situations – will also vary according to circumstances. Off-the-shelf materials are thus rarely adequate for these purposes, and devising an appropriate review strategy would need to begin with an attempt to clarify where roles and responsibilities would lie in the particular setting concerned.

Frameworks such as that outlined earlier in this chapter, in figure 4.2 , can greatly assist this process of clarification. In the case of a largely self-directed tutorial group, for instance, mapping roles against that framework might well produce the kind of result shown in figure 4.10. The tutor remains responsible for overall goals and for organisational matters; the students bear the brunt of responsibility for the effectiveness of interaction within the group's meetings; and responsibilities for establishing ground rules and planning and structuring tasks are to some degree shared. In such an instance, a pro forma such as that which was shown in figure 4.9 might well have been appropriate. But if, by way of contrast, the approach to group-based learning adopted had been that of student-led seminars, with the tutor in regular attendance but predominantly acting as a master-of-ceremonies, a rather different map of roles and responsibilities would be arrived at, and a correspondingly different pro forma would be called for.

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EXTENDING EXPERTISE

This chapter has been an especially difficult one to assemble because, as we have seen, group-based learning has been evolving and diversifying in a variety of directions. The aim has therefore been to try to encompass this diversity and thus ensure that any tutor who explores the chapter will find at least some possibilities which are applicable to the approaches he or she habitually adopts. Ultimately, however, reviewing one's expertise in group-based learning and teaching should go beyond habit and custom if it is to be genuinely productive. From time to time tutors also need to take stock of their personal repertoire of strategies as a whole and consider whether recasting familiar strategies – and experimenting with new ones – might enhance their effectiveness. Sounding out colleagues on what they have tried, or exploring some of the possibilities discussed in the sources below, might help chart out a new direction.

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1 From Lyon Playfair's 1858 Inaugural Lecture as Professor of Chemistry at the University of Edinburgh. Cited in Davie, G. (1961). *The Democratic Intellect. Scotland and Her Universities in the Nineteenth Century.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, p.21. A 'prelector' was a lecturer.

2 An ironic consequence has been that the term 'small-group teaching' no longer seems an appropriate way of referring to seminars, tutorials and other forms of group-based learning.

3 Anderson, C. (1997). Enabling and Shaping Understanding through Tutorials. In: Marton, F., Hounsell, D. and Entwistle, N., eds. *The Experience of Learning: Implications for Teaching and Studying in Higher Education.* Rev. edn. Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, pp.184-197.

4 See for example Forster, F. (1995). Tutorials in Arts and Social Sciences. In: Forster, F., Hounsell, D. and Thompson, S., eds. *Tutoring and Demonstrating: A Handbook.* Edinburgh and Sheffield: TLA Centre/UCoSDA, pp.11-25.

5 The material presented in figures 4.1 and 4.2 was initially developed in close collaboration with our colleague Fred Forster, and we are grateful here and elsewhere in the chapter for his many thoughtful comments and insights.

6 See Davie's *The Democratic Intellect*, pp.14ff.

7 For an example of a set of ground rules, see Bligh, D. A. and Jaques, D. (1986). Evaluation by Teachers. In: Bligh, D.A., ed. *Teach Thinking by Discussion.* Guildford: SRHE & NFER-Nelson. pp.202-203.

8 For a discussion of the benefits of videotaping tutorials, see Abercrombie, M.L.J. and Terry, P.M. (1993). Using Videotapes to Improve Teaching in Small Groups. In: Nias, J., ed. *The Human Nature of Learning. Selections from the Work of M.L.J. Abercrombie.* Guildford: SRHE & Open UP, pp.161-164.

9 From Day, K. (1995). Feedback on Teaching. In: Forster, F., Hounsell, D. and Thompson, S., eds. *Tutoring and Demonstrating: A Handbook.* Edinburgh and Sheffield: TLA Centre/UCoSDA, p.82.

10 There are of course many other kinds of difficulties which can beset group-based learning and teaching. For a unique discussion of commonplace difficulties and how they might be addressed, see Tiberius, R. (1990). *Small-Group Teaching: A Trouble-Shooting Guide.* Toronto: OISE Press/The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

11 Based on a pro forma originally devised at the University of Lancaster by Dai Hounsell and Alan Betjemann.

12 See for example the section entitled 'Assessing Group- and Teamwork' in Hounsell, D. , McCulloch, M. and Scott, M., eds. (1996). *The ASSHE Inventory: Changing Assessment Practices in Scottish Higher Education.* Edinburgh and Sheffield: TLA Centre, University of Edinburgh, Napier University and UCoSDA. pp.43-60.

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Chapter 5

Reviewing Laboratory and Fieldwork Practicals

It makes things clear, often explains things in ways that maybe lectures can't. You can actually see it for yourself and work it out for yourself.[1]

An Electrical Engineering Student

INTRODUCTION

Given the considerable contribution of practicals and fieldwork to many undergraduate courses, especially within the medical, physical and social sciences, it is important for any review of teaching to include these components whenever applicable. Practicals and fieldwork are demanding in terms of preparation time for staff, and contact time for both staff and students. They also tend to consume a significant proportion of students' overall study time, particularly when it comes to writing up reports. Nevertheless, some research findings suggest that many students, particularly in the early years of a course, are unclear about how their practicals or fieldwork relate to the rest of the course and just what it is they ought to be getting out of them.

Practicals and fieldwork can, of course, be an expensive part of courses and may well be the target of cost-cutting exercises in the current context of rises in student numbers and static or decreased units of resource. Questions therefore arise as to whether there might be alternative ways or methods of teaching the material – 'dry labs' or simulation exercises, for instance, with or without computer assistance – which would prove more efficient or at least more economical. In this situation, the many and flexible opportunities afforded by practical and fieldwork may well need not simply to be reiterated, but to be robustly reaffirmed by feedback on their productiveness.

Despite the importance of practicals and fieldwork and the amount of time devoted to them, they receive surprisingly little attention in most instruments for obtaining course feedback. Moreover, the feedback questions traditionally posed have tended to focus on the logistics involved, rather than to explore the quantity and quality of students' learning.

SETTING THE AGENDA

Deciding what to review and how to go about it may well be more complex than in other areas of teaching, particularly if you have the dual role of organising and overseeing a series of practicals, as well as actively running an individual practical group. And where teaching is to some extent delegated (e.g. to lab demonstrators) you are less readily able to keep track of how things are working out, especially with respect to how far the design of the practical(s) has succeeded in promoting and enhancing students' knowledge and skills.

In any review, you will want to strike a sensible balance between the potential benefits in terms of improving teaching and learning, and the amount of effort entailed in collecting and evaluating feedback. Accordingly, this chapter and the review materials it offers are geared towards collecting feedback in economical ways, which will also help ease the task of evaluating and acting on the information. The approach adopted is deliberately 'light-touch' in an attempt to streamline a process which could otherwise be unduly cumbersome.

In particular, the chapter emphasises the value of keeping tabs on student experiences on a practical-by-practical basis as the course proceeds. If this is done systematically, there are several advantages. For instance, it gives you a good sense of what is

going on for both students and demonstrators across the different occasions when the same practical is run. This then provides the opportunity to make adjustments on an 'as-and-when' basis, since even quite modest tweaking can result in considerable improvements. When you begin to get an overview of a sequence of practicals, minor changes that could either be immediately made or logged for future implementation may well suggest themselves.

Information collected in a regular, on-going way is likely to be more accurate and helpful than retrospective reflection and comment. Also, by the end of the course, you will already be alert to some of the strengths and weakness of the practicals and the teaching. And this accumulation of feedback data will mean that you can better target – if not reduce in amount – the additional information sought for a summative review.

LABORATORY PRACTICALS

As with other methods of teaching, it is desirable to clarify at the outset what for you as the teacher are the key dimensions of organising and teaching the practicals. Figure 5.1 indicates seven key dimensions you may need to consider, as well as suggesting the sorts of feedback questions relevant to each dimension. Inevitably a listing of this kind is only a starting-point, and will need adjusting in order to reflect your own teaching style and intentions, the nature of the specific practicals, and the broader course context. You may also want to be selective in which aspects you choose to monitor, and the particular blend of aspects attended to may of course change over time.

Once key dimensions and the questions associated with them have been spelt out, they can form the basis of a pro forma of the kind illustrated in figure 5.2. Such a pro forma could be used by either a solo teacher or by someone responsible for organising and overseeing practicals where others (e.g. demonstrators) are involved in the actual teaching. The completed pro forma shown in figure 5.2 has been filled out by the latter. While a pro forma of this type could be used for each practical, it is more likely to be employed periodically, whether at fixed points in the course or on specific occasions when it seems timely.

If you want to tap into the student perspective, without either asking for or generating too much information, then a fairly simple yet focused

KEY DIMENSIONS OF PRACTICAL WORK

1. **Equipment and Facilities**
   - Is the best use being made of the space available?
   - Are adequate amounts of the appropriate equipment and materials available?
   - Is the equipment well set-up and working properly?
2. **Health and Safety**
   - Are health and safety guidelines explicit and understood by all staff and students involved?
   - Are all necessary safety measures observed at all times?
   - Is everyone aware of emergency procedures and how to obtain first aid or other assistance?
3. **Aims and Design**
   - Are the aims of the practical session(s) explicit and clearly articulated?
   - Do knowledge and skills focused on in the practical(s) complement and extend those acquired by the students in the rest of the course?
   - How in step with one another are the lecture(s) and practical session(s)?
   - Is there a clear structure with well-sequenced activities for the practical(s)?
   - Is the allocation of time for the different elements of the practical(s) realistic?
4. **Preparation and Briefing**
   - Are both demonstrators and students given enough advance information for preparation?
   - Does the written guidance help students achieve the objectives of the practical(s)?
   - Do students understand how to carry out any follow-up activity and/or assessed tasks?
5. **Interaction**
   - Are staff sufficiently competent to help students acquire the specific knowledge and skills entailed in the practical(s)?
   - Is there an adequate staff:student ratio during the practical(s)?
   - Are student groupings flexibly organised (size and composition) to suit the tasks ?
   - Are there opportunities for students to review outcomes and /or any unexpected results?
6. **Assessment**
   - Are any assessed tasks well-matched to the overall objectives of each practical?
   - Is marked work appropriately weighted in terms of the time and effort students need to give to the task?
   - Is assessed work returned promptly?
   - Are students given adequately detailed feedback which shows them how to improve?
7. **Monitoring**
   - Are demonstrators encouraged to reflect on their own practice and effectiveness?
   - Is there a system for staff to relay any difficulties encountered by students?
   - Do you take stock periodically and identify what improvements can be made?

Figure 5.1

AN EXAMPLE OF A COMPLETED PRACTICALS PRO FORMA

1. Equipment and Facilities

For some reason (?), a large number of beakers were broken during the practical and there were insufficient spares in the cupboard. Implications for Friday's group?

2. Health and Safety

Students finally seem to have appreciated the importance of keeping goggles on at all times. Check who has replaced Mr. Biggs as the nearest first aider.

3. Aims and Design

Now that the practicals are on a fortnightly cycle, students at the beginning of the week are more geared up for what's expected of them.

While most groups are coping fine, the second batch on Wednesdays are still having difficulty with getting through the work and neither the demonstrator nor myself can really figure out why. Maybe it's because they're a mixed group and their grasp of the maths we're currently covering in the lectures hasn't had time to bed down?

4. Preparation and Briefing

The instructions given in section 5 need to be made easier to follow as demonstrators this week have resorted to giving a lot of additional assistance.

5. Interaction

Students are showing signs of recognising that they can learn a lot from one another and are not relying solely on staff. Finding time (and energy!) to review what's happened at the end of the practical is still proving problematic - especially for that Wednesday group.

6. Assessment

Students in Claire's practical are complaining that their reports still haven't been returned, but other groups are fine. Reports are often more highly polished than they need to be and students therefore don't seem to have enough time to do the marking. How can we fix this??

Judging by my group's work, at least the material covered in week 3 is still not well understood.

7. Monitoring

Filling the standard report form in the review has really encouraged the demonstrators to report back on a regular basis, as well as a more detailed

(Group sizes are down for now, but if others increase we'll have to adjust these accordingly. Check with Pat at the beginning of next term what the projections are.)

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Figure 5.2

questionnaire such as the one illustrated in figure 5.3 might be useful. The particular dimensions targeted could of course be adapted to suit your requirements. (Another example of a short questionnaire, which focusses on student learning in fieldwork, appears later in this chapter – see figure 5.9.)

Although the delegated nature of much practical teaching can mean that you as the organiser and overseer are somewhat removed from what is happening on the ground, the compensating characteristic is that you have other colleagues able to provide feedback from their various perspectives. Both demonstrators and lab technicians are particularly well-placed both to provide information about how the practicals have gone and to suggest improvements.

Tapping into this source can be achieved through a variety of means, with regular demonstrators' meetings perhaps being the most common. Such meetings are very useful: for briefing purposes, as a support mechanism, for implementing minor on-course adjustments, and for reviewing how in the longer term the practicals might be improved. However, they may not be the best forum for generating data to inform a measured and detailed evaluation of individual practicals and practical groups. Impressions fade over time and immediate discussion of each practical would be unduly time-consuming with a large group of demonstrators.

One possibility for keeping a close track of the practicals is to ask each demonstrator to turn in (or email) at the end of every session a standardised report form which is quick and easy to complete. An example is given in figure 5.4. This would give the organiser of the practicals information about the logistics of each practical group (e.g. attendance,

A QUESTIONNAIRE ABOUT PRACTICALS[2]

Please put a tick in the appropriate box to indicate your response to each of the following statements about the practicals you attended as part of the course. Thank you very much.

	strongly agree	*agree*	*unsure*	*disagree*	*strongly disagree*
The practicals					
• covered key areas and ideas					
• were well-linked to lectures					
• helped relate theory to practice					
• were well-planned and structured					
• were lively and stimulating					
The demonstrator					
• made clear what was expected of students					
• helped students with any difficulties they encountered					
• was interested in students and their progress					
As a student					
• I looked forward to the practicals					
• I enjoyed being in the practicals					
• I learned a lot from the practicals					

Please add below any comments about what would have made the practicals better for you:

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Figure 5.3

DEMONSTRATOR'S REPORT FORM

Demonstrator: No. of students attending:

Practical No.: Day: Time:

Proportion completing the practical? ☐ < 1/3 of class ☐ 1/3 - 2/3 of class ☐ > 2/3 of class

1. WHAT WENT WELL

- •
- •
- •
- •

2. AREAS OF DIFFICULTY Please tick any of the following which caused any difficulties.

a.	Equipment difficulties	b.	Insufficient technical aid at hand
c.	Time allocated for each stage	d.	Size or composition of subgroups
e.	Students' theoretical knowledge	f.	Students' skill base
g.	Students too dependent on demonstrator	h.	Students reluctant to ask for help
i.	Written guidance	j.	Other

Please briefly clarify below (indicating the relevant letter) the nature of the problem that arose.

3. ISSUES ARISING

- What could students do differently next time to get more out of the practical?
- What would you as the demonstrator want to do differently next time?
- Any other comments or suggestions for improvement?

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Figure 5.4

COLLATED SUMMARY OF DEMONSTRATORS' REPORTS

Practical No.: 5 Average session attendance 26/30 No. of log sheets returned: 6/6

Tally of proportions completing the practical work:

0 $<^1/_3$ of class: 1 2 3 4 5 6

2 $^1/_3$-$^2/_3$ of class: 1 2 ② 4 ⑤ 6

4 $>^2/_3$ of class: ① ② 3 ④ 5 ⑥

1. WHAT WENT WELL

- Got going much more quickly now that the equipment difficulties are resolved (x4)
- Several comments to the effect that students are getting more confident and seem to be enjoying it
- 2 demonstrators noted that fewer questions are being asked about the theoretical underpinnings of the practical

2. AREAS OF DIFFICULTY

0 Equipment 1 2 3 4 5 6

2 Technical assistance 1 2 3 4 ⑤ ⑥
Technician ill for 2 days last week.

5 Time allocated for each stage ① ② 3 4 ⑤ ⑥
Strong feeling that it is OK for front-loaded, the rest is a real scramble

1 Size or composition of subgroups 1 2 ③ 4 5 6
For this group self-selection of subgroups doesn't appear to be working

1 Students' theoretical knowledge 1 2 3 4 ⑤ 6
The 1st Monday class didn't have the benefit of Tuesday's lecture and seemed to find it much harder going

0 Students' skill base 1 2 3 4 5 6
(Definitely improving!)

6 Students too dependant on ① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ demonstrator
(See Below)

0 Students reluctant to ask for help 1 2 3 4 5 6

6 Written guidance ① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥
Suggested that it might be worth including the specific formulae at the start of Section A

5 Other 1 ② 3 ④ 5 ⑥
Lots of queries about the revised submission dates for reports

3. ISSUES ARISING

- Practical too front-loaded
- Selection of subgroups in the Tuesday afternoon practical
- Monday practical out of synch with lectures
- Specific formulae in section A
- Due dates for reports

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Figure 5.5

proportion of the class completing the exercise). It could also provide important insights into how well the practical was designed and functioned. A very real additional benefit of a report form can be to encourage self-reflection in demonstrators (who might also want to include copies in a teaching portfolio or dossier on their work if they were following an award-bearing programme of initial training in higher education teaching). And if appropriate, a similar pro forma could be devised for completion by lab technicians.

While collecting and analysing information from demonstrators and technicians on a regular basis is clearly demanding, there are some substantial pay-offs in the longer as well as the short term. The process need not be an undue burden if an efficient collation method is used like the one illustrated in figure 5.5. This example, which employs the same headings and criteria as in the demonstrator report form (figure 5.4), shows the composite results of summarising and evaluating demonstrators' reports concerning six different practical groups.

Once you have a global overview of the practicals and have noted the issues arising, an organiser's log can help in deciding on the action to be taken, by whom, and when. Figure 5.6 is an example of a log for use by organisers of practicals. The extract shown relates to the issues logged in figure 5.5, and indicates the revisions which are to be made together with the time-frames for doing so.

EXTRACT FROM A PRACTICALS LOG

WK	ISSUES ARISING	ACTION TO BE TAKEN	WHEN	✓
4	- Practical too front-loaded	See whether the level of practicals 2, 5, & 9 can be re-pitched so that there's a more even distribution of work between them	At course review time	
4	- Selection of lab groups in the Tuesday afternoon practical	Ask the demonstrator to make sure that the subgroups are more mixed in terms of ability levels	Now	✓
4	- Monday practical out of sync with lectures	Probably have to live with it, but Sandy suggests that a note of key-points of the lectures could be made available at the end of the previous week's lectures	Try to do by the end of June	
4	- Specific formulae in lecture A	Discuss further with demonstrators about what exactly would be most helpful here	Next demonstrators' meeting	
4	- Due dates for reports	Ask demonstrators to make a general announcement and I'll flag it on the web site	Now	✓

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Figure 5.6

FIELDWORK PRACTICALS

At the beginning of this chapter we referred to the financial and resource pressures which have in some cases led to reductions in the amount of laboratory work or to the substitution of dry for wet labs. These same pressures can also adversely affect fieldwork practicals. Fieldwork in many disciplines is at risk of being viewed as an 'optional extra', rather than as a core course component. Even in areas where fieldwork practicals are seen as indispensable, you may feel yourself to be under an increased onus to demonstrate the very real contribution which they make to student learning. A better articulation of the educational benefits to be derived from fieldwork may be needed in order to justify the expenditure of time, effort and money – both by the department and by the students.

Fieldwork practicals run the spectrum from 'look-see outings' through structured field exercises to students working unsupervised in the field on an independent project. If well-planned and executed, fieldwork practicals, like those held in the laboratory, can help synthesise students' knowledge and understanding, encourage student interest and involvement, develop observational, recording and analytical skills, as well as build confidence. However, the flexibility and variety which are one of the great strengths of fieldwork also mean that any review has to be tailored to the particular form of fieldwork concerned. Using a single off-the-shelf feedback instrument is seldom likely to be appropriate.

Working in the field typically involves a high level of investment on your part in exercises which are less within your direct control than other teaching and learning activities that take place within the home institution. Fieldwork can take a lot of time and trouble to organise (including making contingency plans) and student safety is often an issue of very real practical concern. If fieldwork is not a regular part of the course, students may be less keenly aware of what is expected of them, and the learning outcomes themselves tend to be less predictable than in, for example, a structured laboratory setting. The stakes are bound to be high, especially if there is only one chance to get it right. In addition, factors such as the weather or other people's co-operation can have a disproportionate influence both on the actual outcomes and on perceptions of success.

REFLECTIONS ON A FIELDWORK PRACTICAL: A PRO FORMA[1]

As soon as possible after a fieldwork practical write a short account of what took place. Concentrate on what actually happened.

Then try to identify the following:

- Planned things I did – before and/or during the field trip – which helped students learn.
- Anything unplanned I did during the trip which seemed to be helpful.
- Anything – planned or unplanned – which may have hindered students' learning.

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Figure 5.7

As a result, it is easy to allow the logistical details, the enjoyment factor or other immediate impressions to colour – whether negatively or positively – your assessment of how worthwhile a particular field trip has been. Thus, your approach to review may need to find a way of counter-balancing any tendency to take a somewhat polarised view of what has happened so that the strengths and weaknesses of the teaching and learning are not obscured.

Taking stock of your own analysis of the outcomes in a systematic way soon after a fieldwork exercise has been undertaken enables you to take forward 'lessons learned' into either future activities or the same field trip on another occasion. One way of prompting yourself to do this on a consistent basis is to make use of a short pro forma. Figure 5.7 opposite is one example and another (for adaptation) can be found in Chapter 3, figure 3.2. A more extended approach would be to tailor to your fieldwork activity the laboratory practicals pro forma given in figure 5.2.

As with laboratory practicals, people other than yourself may be involved in assisting with teaching in the field – with or without you being present. In either case it is helpful to check out how well the field trip was managed, and for this the kind of checklist reproduced in figure 5.8 can be of assistance. It will help promote self-reflection for either yourself or someone else.

Capturing how students have reacted to the fieldwork and what they have learned can be done in various ways, depending, for example, on whether the focus of attention is a single field trip or a series. One possibility is to use the post-it 'continue, stop, start' method outlined in Chapter 7.

Another very practical way of reviewing a single field trip is to provide each student with an index card which will be collected in at the end. One side is labelled 'things learned' and the other 'suggestions'. During the course of the fieldwork they can then note down a couple of key learning outcomes as they occur, together with any ideas for making the trip more productive. The use of index cards makes it easy to collate the comments by theme, ready for subsequent analysis.

Hopefully students will identify your intended learning outcomes, but there may also be some equally pleasing unanticipated results, which you may want to try to build in for another occasion. If, on the other hand, some of the key outcomes you

LEADING FIELDWORK: A SELF-MONITORING CHECKLIST[a]

Record by means of a tick (✓) in the appropriate column the comments which come closest to your opinion.

How well did I ...?	well	satisfactorily	not very well
make sure that students had the necessary materials, instructions, equipment, etc.			
get the fieldwork underway promptly			
try to ensure that all the set tasks were completed in the time available			
keep track of progress across the whole class			
handle students' questions and queries			
provide help when students encountered difficulties			
respond to students as individuals			
help sustain students' interest			
bring things to a close and indicate follow-up task(s)			

Figure 5.8

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF FIELDWORK

	FIELDTRIP 1	FIELDTRIP 2	FIELDTRIP 3
	✓✓ ✓ 0 ✗✗ ?	✓✓ ✓ 0 ✗✗ ?	✓✓ ✓ 0 ✗✗ ?
1. **How well prepared did you feel in terms of...**			
• logistics (e.g. joining instructions, equipment needed)?			
• the work you were asked to do beforehand (e.g. reading)?			
• knowing what you were supposed to get out of the fieldtrip?			
2. **During the fieldtrip...**			
• did you have enough information to feel reasonably confident about what you were doing?			
• how well did your group work together?			
• did the activities planned engage your interest?			
3. **To what extent did the fieldwork extend...**			
• your knowledge?			
• your understanding?			
• your skills?			

4. **Please note any suggestions for improvement** (be as specific as you can).

Fieldtrip 1 .....

Fieldtrip 2 .....

Fieldtrip 3 .....

Figure 5.6

had anticipated were not in evidence, you may need to take immediate action to make up the lost ground. You will also have to embark on a careful reappraisal of what happened. For example, were the students adequately prepared before undertaking the fieldwork, or will adaptations be needed to the design and implementation of the fieldwork itself? The students' own suggestions may help provide some pointers as to what action could be taken.

Lastly, you might opt to tap into students' perceptions by using a questionnaire of the kind illustrated in figure 5.9. Although the main part of the questionnaire simply asks students to respond by ticking the appropriate boxes, it also invites students to suggest ways in which the fieldtrips might have been improved. Here again, you may come across some comments and ideas which you had not anticipated, but could put to good use.

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2 This questionnaire draws on ideas from publications such as Ramsden, P. and Dodds, A. (1989). *Improving Teaching and Courses: A Guide to Evaluation.* 2nd edn. Melbourne: University of Melbourne. But it has its origins in a questionnaire for the evaluation of small group teaching produced by the Advisory Centre for University Education at the University of Adelaide. See Roe, E. and MacDonald, R. (1983). *Informed Professional Judgment: A Guide to Evaluation in Post-Secondary Education.* St Lucia: University of Queensland Press. pp.180-92.

3 This is very much based on a checklist devised by Graham Gibbs which appears in Brown, S., Jones, C. and Rawnsley, S. (1993). Observing Teaching. SCED Paper 74. Birmingham: Standing Conference on Educational Development. p.37.

4 Adapted from a self-evaluation checklist in Gibbs, G., Habeshaw, S. and Habeshaw, T. (1988). *53 Interesting Ways to Appraise Your Teaching.* Bristol: Technical and Educational Services. p.62.

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Chapter 6

Reviewing Project and Dissertation Supervision

> Project work allows not only for the acquisition of subject-matter knowledge but also for the exercise and development of skills in inquiry and communication, interpersonal relationships ... and of some measure of independence and self-direction in learning.[1]
>
> *David Jaques et al*

INTRODUCTION

The supervision of undergraduate projects, dissertations and similar types of extended assignment work is a distinctive area of teaching responsibilities which is well worth reviewing. For while extended assignments usually turn out to yield high returns, they require a considerable investment of staff energies and are also a high-risk activity for students. Sustained and intensive effort is required, and such research as has been carried out suggests that the outcomes are very much influenced by the role supervisors play: for instance, in briefing and laying the groundwork, in helping students to find an appropriate focus for their study, in giving methodological or other guidance, and in monitoring progress.

The literature about what promotes effective student learning and the development of higher order skills confirms the value of independent study, provided that it is well-structured and supported. As David Jaques observes, "project work has a special place in higher education simply because it is capable of reaching those parts of the body of knowledge that [other] methods cannot reach. It does this by giving students responsibility for making choices and taking initiatives in what they learn".[2] At the same time however the mounting pressures on staff time and rising staff-student ratios make it increasingly difficult to ensure that the opportunities potentially afforded by project work are fully realised in practice. Moreover, there persists the inherent and exacting challenge: that of getting a balance between the developmental and the judgmental facets of supervision which is appropriate and fair. For, as was highlighted twenty years ago, "projects are meant both to *teach* certain skills and at the same time to provide a basis for *testing* the students' acquisition of such skills".[3] Of course this applies to many other kinds of assignments, but usually not on quite the same scale in terms of the amount of effort required, especially since projects tend "to grab time which goes beyond what the assessment weighting would justify".[4]

Various strategies have been developed to grapple with these tensions and no doubt they include ones which you have experimented with, or are keen to try out, in your own work as a supervisor. Some course teams and supervisors would advocate the advantages, especially for novices, of breaking the research and writing processes into several segments with formal submissions and assessments at each stage. This segmented approach can help reduce the likelihood of a lot of work being done that is unproductively off-target. Another option is to ask students to submit a research diary or learning log along with the project report, so that a reflective analysis of the process can be taken into account as well as the more readily assessed product. Other moves include:

- having students present their work and findings orally or by means of posters, as well as or instead of more conventional reports and theses;
- clustering of related projects or dissertations which are amenable to at least some degree of group supervision;
- inviting students to work in pairs or small groups, which provides a measure of peer

SUPERVISION PRACTICE: A STOCKTAKING PRO FORMA

RECAP	*How well I...* Very well Okay Needs improving
GENERAL GROUNDWORK **Clarify through written guidelines/student briefing:** e.g. - aims and scope of project; - supervisor's role (availability,	Comments

PREVIEW	*How well do I/can I...* Confident Unsure Problematic
GENERAL GROUNDWORK **Clarify through written guidelines/student briefing:** e.g. - aims and scope of project; - supervisor's role (availability, likely contact patterns and support); - presentation requirements, deadlines, and any formalities.	Comments
TOPIC SELECTION **Assist student(s) to select a promising topic in terms of:** e.g. - fit with the course; - level of challenge; - skills needed; - interest and contribution to learning.	Comments
SPECIFIC PROJECT PLANNING **Assist student(s) to identify and refine:** e.g. - appropriate methodology; - component tasks and sequence; - timetable and milestones.	Comments
REVIEWING PROGRESS **Keep in touch with:** e.g. - how student(s) are getting on and resolving their problems; - how effective my feedback is proving; - how evenly distributed among students is my contact and support.	Comments
SUBMISSION AND FOLLOW-UP **Encourage:** e.g. - timely submissions and assessment; - feedback on the project and supervision; - student reflection on what they've learned.	Comments

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Figure 6.1

support. However, it does add a further layer of complexity, in terms both of managing collaborative relationships to good effect and of assessing the contributions made by individual students to the overall work of the group.

But whatever broad structures are created or strategies adopted, getting some insights into the strengths and weaknesses of your supervisory practices is germane to your all-round professional development as a university teacher.

KEY ASPECTS OF SUPERVISION

Supervisors' operational contexts and the tasks in which students are engaged are so variable that a good starting point in the review process may well be to clarify what for you, in your situation, are the key dimensions of supervision. The pro forma in figure 6.1 for example, which could be tailored to any specific context, encourages you to take stock of your confidence levels about various aspects of supervision, and then to reappraise how things turned out in practice.

Supervision is an aspect of university teaching where previewing and retracing offer an especially productive approach to review, since avoiding the twin traps of over- or under-supervising is never easy. And even if you are already an experienced and confident supervisor, you could readily adapt this pro forma into an aid to reflection on where your strengths and limitations seem to lie. Even the most case-hardened of supervisors can generally derive some benefit from periodic stocktaking. Being able to draw upon a breadth and depth of experience is a prized asset in supervision, and justifiably so, but it can also mean that while strengths are shrewdly and tellingly deployed, less secure areas of expertise are skated over or sidestepped, and so go unaddressed.

REVIEWING THE STUDENT DOCUMENTATION

One of the most straightforward and common ways of helping students to tackle their dissertations or projects is to provide written briefing materials. From time to time, therefore, it can be useful to take a careful look at what is currently provided (either by yourself or with a colleague) and seeing how well it fits the bill.

A recent survey in one faculty of such guidance materials brought to light an issue which cut across subject and departmental boundaries – and indeed would probably be equally apparent in other faculties and other universities. This was a tendency to refer to the content, style, presentation and submission of the written product, rather than to provide practical guidance for going about the task. In consequence, the students concerned were generally well-informed about what their completed project reports or dissertations should look like, but lacked advice on, for example, how to set about choosing the topic, doing the research, pacing the work and consulting with supervisors. However, just this kind of advice is appearing on bookshop shelves and is worth while consulting.[5] Even if the guidance given does not seem appropriate to your students, it may at least help you in thinking through what dos and don'ts you would want them to keep in the forefront of their minds.

Another evidently tricky issue is finding a way to convey satisfactorily the criteria by which the finished product will be judged, and the relative contribution to the overall assessment of the various aspects and components. As with less extended written work, the use of a structured feedback form (see p.62) can help make things more explicit. It may also be desirable – especially where the students have little prior experience of undertaking projects or dissertations at this level of academic study – to indicate which criteria will carry most weight, for it will not necessarily be self-evident to students that marking practices may differ significantly from those which were applied in assessing their essays, reports or other more conventional assignments.

For further ideas about possible improvements to your guidance documentation, you can ask students for their reactions, perhaps encouraging them to note any suggested amendments or additions directly on the text as they go along and return it to you at the end. Another source of ideas, providing 'pointers' and 'guidelines' that you may want to ask to borrow or adapt, can be the documentation prepared to accompany similar student tasks undertaken on other courses (in your department or elsewhere). Interestingly, it may be *how* rather than *what* things are said, the tone and style as much as the substance, which you find most appealing or instructive.

But having well-targeted documentation, which explains to your students the nature of the task and gives advice on how to set about it, will undoubtedly help to reduce their reliance on you

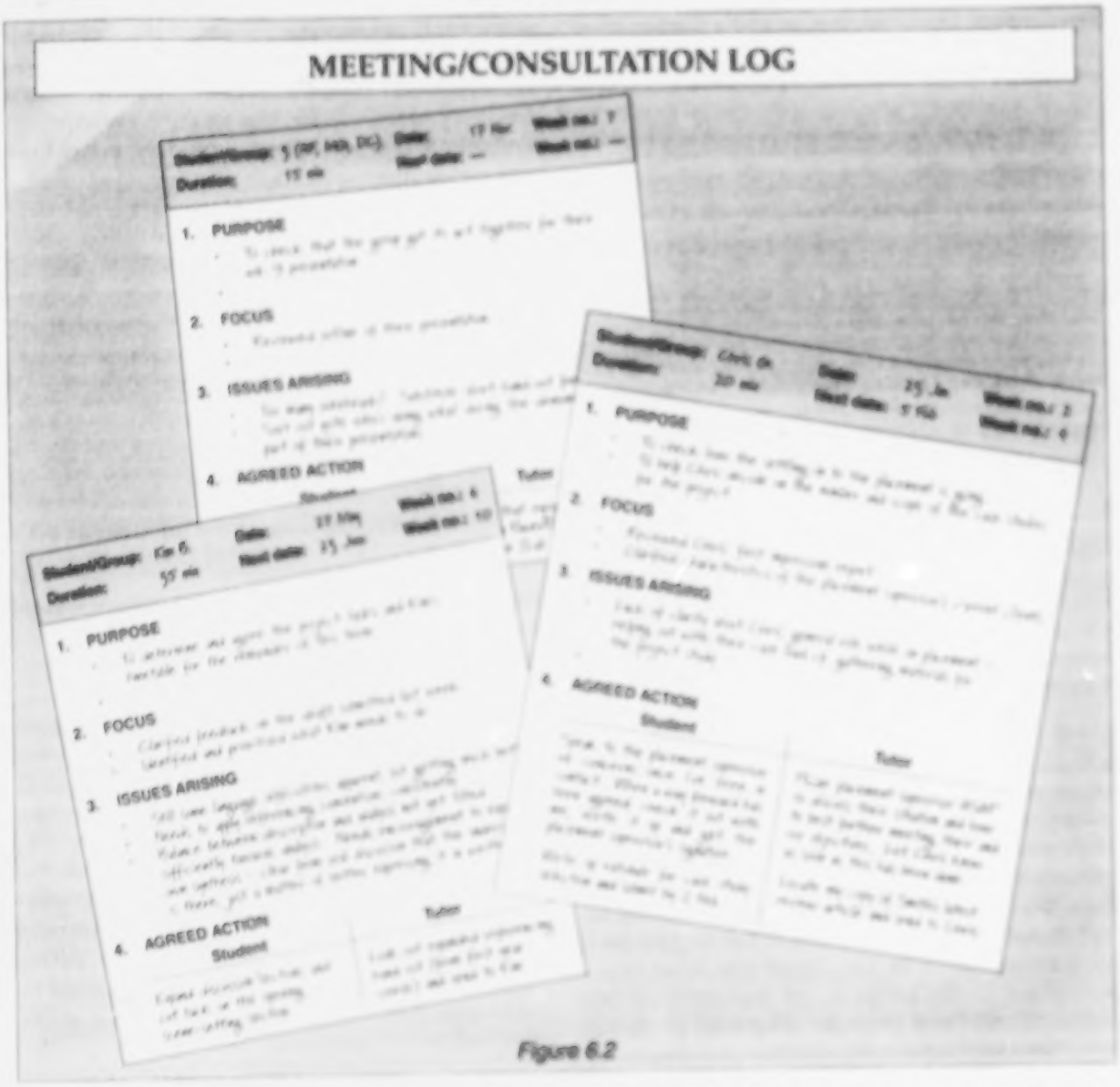

Figure 6.2

as a supervisor. It will also increase their chances of meeting the standards required, especially if they are encouraged to access examples of work completed in previous years.

TRACKING STUDENTS' PROGRESS

In many cases you are likely to be supervising a larger number of students than you can comfortably cope with in the time available. If, as a result, the number of consultations has to be rationed or otherwise restricted, it is all the more important that they are purposeful and productive.' The use of a simple meeting or consultation log, such as the one illustrated in figure 6.2, can help to structure meetings and plan the next steps as well as to keep a reliable record of what's happened and how individual students are getting on. If the number of individuals or meetings concerned is not unmanageably large, retrospective consideration of these logs in the light of project or dissertation outcomes could provide a useful commentary on your management of the supervision process. How quickly and effectively did you pick up on, and take steps to resolve, specific difficulties arising? Are there any more general lessons to be learnt? What could be done to make things run more smoothly – for you and for your students?

ENSURING EQUITY OF TREATMENT

With a large number of students to supervise, each making progress at different rates, and working on topics which you may not be equally well-informed about or interested in, even-handedness becomes a major concern. The nub of the challenge lies in being

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SUPERVISION LOG (front side)

Record of Consultations (• = 20 minutes)

STUDENT/GROUP	PROJECT TITLE	wk 1	wk 2	wk 3	wk 4	wk 5	wk 6	wk 7	wk 8
A	'wwwww'		•		••				
B	'xx x xxxx'		•	••				•••	
C	'yyyy yyyyy'	•			•				
D	'zzzzz zzz zz'		•		•		•		

Figure 6.3

responsive to the needs and concerns of each individual, whilst at the same time offering all students broadly comparable amounts of your time and support. One way of systematically monitoring how far you are succeeding in doing this is to keep a supervision log. The example above shows the layout of a log which on one side (figure 6.3) records the number and duration of consultations for each student or group of students. On the reverse it encourages you to review on a week-by-week basis what's happening across all the projects for which you are the supervisor (figure 6.4).

SUPERVISION LOG (reverse)

PROJECT	COMMENTS WEEK
1	Following the project work briefing, as anticipated C + pick off the mark, secure remaining students sign up for next week.
2	All project outlines/timetables look like they're coming in fine.
3	Due to technical problems, B arranging to slightly re-focus the project, seems okay to me, but check formal procedure with C.O. 'Manual' to be in the documentation?
4	Most people seem to be on track. No more formal appointments until after vacation.
5	
6	Blocking out wk. 5 didn't seem to cause students any problems.
7	Looks like technical difficulties aren't the only problems for B (but personal rather than anything general)
8	

Figure 6.4

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STUDENT PROJECT QUESTIONNAIRE

1. **Now that you've completed your project, please circle the three words below which best sum up your feelings about it:**

   challenging tedious enjoyable unrewarding worthwhile straightforward scary
   exasperating useful time-consuming interesting hard rushed exciting gruelling

   Are there any other words that come to mind? _____

2. **From the project documentation were you sufficiently clear about:**

	yes	no		yes	no
• how the project would differ from previous work undertaken?			• the role and availability of your supervisor during the project?		
• submission deadlines and procedures for the project components?			• the criteria by which your project would be judged?		

3. **To what extent did the briefing meeting help to clarify:**

	a lot	somewhat	not at all
• the appropriate scope of the project?			
• the standard expected in your research and write-up?			
• how to go about carrying out the project?			

How could the briefing meeting be improved?

4. **How well did your supervisor help you:** ✓✓ ✓ ✗

   • to refine the focus of your research topic? ✓✓ ✓ ✗
   • to pace your project work? ✓✓ ✓ ✗
   • to gauge the progress of your research ✓✓ ✓ ✗
   • to set feedback on your written work? ✓✓ ✓ ✗

5. **As regards the amount of contact with your supervisor, was this:** Too much Just right Too little

   Any other comments? _____

6. **Please indicate any problems encountered during the course of your project and what would have helped you to deal with them.** _____

Figure 6.5

STUDENT FEEDBACK ON PROJECTS AND DISSERTATIONS

Student perspectives on the experience of undertaking an extended assignment can help highlight the positives, as well as indicate changes that you might consider making to the design of the activity or to your handling of the supervision process. One quick feedback exercise, using either 'post-it' notes or index cards, involves students noting down:

- two things *my supervisor could have done* to help me get more out of this project/dissertation;
- two things *I could have done* to help me get more out of this project/dissertation.

Figure 6.5 indicates another possibility: a questionnaire specifically devised to gather student feedback on projects or dissertations. This particular example is quite compact and aims to generate a more rounded view than is sometimes the case. It elicits a small amount of qualitative information as well as quantitative data in order to add to the richness of the picture given, but should still prove relatively straightforward to analyse.

A third possibility would be to arrange a review with the students of issues such as:

- what the students had learned from the project or dissertation;
- the project/dissertation process and the support given by staff;
- how the projects/dissertations could be made more useful.

An alternative approach is to ask your students to brainstorm what for them were key issues in relation to the project or dissertation which they have just completed. Sometimes they may need to discuss things for a short while in two's or three's first. Then the students' reactions – positive or less positive – are logged at the left-hand side of a flip chart or white board. Once the reactions have been listed, without further comment at this stage, each student has five 'votes' to allocate. If someone has strong feelings about a particular item they may, for example, wish to give it four votes, leaving only one vote for a second item. A different student may choose to cast the five votes more evenly, by distributing them in one's or two's across several items. Depending on the number of students involved, individuals can either note their votes directly onto the flip chart, or there can be a show of hands for each item in turn. When all the votes are cast it will become clear which reactions the group has endorsed and the strength of students' feelings about any particular item. Figure 6.6 reproduces part of the outcome of this kind of process. The pattern of the students' reactions can then usefully become the basis for further reflection and plenary discussion.

BRAINSTORM EXERCISE

REACTIONS	VOTES
glad we'd had the method module first!	✓ ✓ ✓
the initial briefing meeting really helped	✓
finding we don't speak for themselves	
enjoyed deciding how to go about the study	✓✓ ✓ ✓
wanted more tutor comment and feedback	✓✓ ✓✓✓✓ ✓
all felt rather overwhelming at times	✓
a good set of topics to choose from	✓
narrowing down the broad topic was hard	
very time-consuming – other things suffered	✓ ✓✓✓✓ ✓✓ ✓ ✓ ✓
challenging but worthwhile	✓ ✓ ✓✓ ✓✓
would like to hear about other people's projects	✓ ✓✓✓ ✓ ✓

Figure 6.6

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REVIEWING WITH COLLEAGUES

As other colleagues are usually also acting as supervisors, it may be useful to arrange a debriefing meeting. These meetings could be geared to one or more of a variety of purposes.

One such purpose would be to share experiences generally and thus engage in an overall review of the project or dissertation work set. Aspects which might fruitfully be explored could be briefing arrangements, the scope given to students in their choice of topics and methodology, the adequacy of the resources (materials, equipment, facilities) available, and the nature and volume of calls on supervisors' time and expertise.

A second option would be more explicitly focussed. Colleagues could be invited, for instance, to explore a key issue, 'What makes for a good undergraduate research question?', by considering the outcomes of what students produced in relation to the topics and titles chosen. Or they could reappraise the role and significance of the project or dissertation within the wider scheme of study. Does it come at the optimum point for students to devise maximum benefit from it and to achieve the best of which they are capable? Is it preceded by adequate opportunities to gain practice in some of the skills which will be called for? Does the assessment weighting given to it reflect its relative importance in course aims and objectives, and match the effort and commitment which are invested by both students and supervisors?

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SEE ALSO

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Chapter 7

Reviewing Assignments and Assessment

'Students can, with difficulty, escape from the effects of poor teaching, they cannot (by definition, if they want to graduate) escape the effects of poor assessment.'

David Boud

INTRODUCTION

A key aspect of reviewing teaching is consideration of the various tasks which you assign to students and the assessments that you carry out. Course assignments, whether formally assessed or not, take up a lot of students' time and effort, while teachers make a corresponding investment in devising tasks, assessing them and providing feedback. Assignment and assessment strategies also drive learning in the sense of shaping what is regarded as important and how students go about their studying. Research from the mid-1970s onwards has only served to confirm Rowntree's much-quoted assertion that 'the spirit and style of student assessment defines the *de facto* curriculum'.[1] And in a higher education climate characterised by reduced resources in real terms, coupled with concerns about standards and quality, it is important to re-examine our practices in this area, as well as to ensure that they are explicit and accountable.

Types of assignment and assessment are many and various, with a fast-expanding repertoire of approaches now in use, as illustrated by a recent inventory of changing practices across the Scottish higher education sector.[2] Assignments may be based on group rather than individual work, and responsibility for evaluating the quality of what is produced may be shared with students as well as with teaching colleagues. But whether the methods used are less or more traditional, quite substantial differences are to be found between courses, disciplines, and degree programmes in, for example:

- the form that particular assignments take, which may involve reading, writing, oral and/or practical work, and considerable variations in their scope, size, focus, timing, duration, etc.;
- the specific knowledge, skills, attitudes, and understandings that students need to draw on (and in what proportions) in order to complete an assignment successfully;
- the purposes of assignments, which may be some mixture of diagnostic (uncovering strengths and weaknesses), formative (geared to helping students improve) or summative (encapsulating a student's level of attainment in the form of a mark or grade).

This rich diversity is to be expected, given both the distinctive requirements of different disciplines or subject areas and the variety of aims, objectives and learning outcomes pursued in different courses and programmes of study. Diversity can also be a boon to students, because it opens up a greater range of stimuli and opportunities for engagement than would be the case if the assessment diet was much more uniform.

Yet whatever the type of assignment or assessment under consideration, the challenges for the review process do not vary a great deal: similar clusters of key issues arise, and similar methods of gathering information and feedback apply. This is also the case whether attention is focussed at the level of:

- a single assignment (e.g. the reading or problem questions to be done for a tutorial or practical);
- a particular kind of assessment (e.g. essays, presentation or poster options, short-answer exam questions);

- the overall pattern of assignments and assessment across a course unit or scheme of study.

THE LARGER PICTURE

In reviewing assignments and assessment it is of course equally important to take a close look at the overall picture as at the component parts. Overarching assessment policies and procedural frameworks may well be relatively fixed due to the need for consistency across parallel or otherwise equivalent courses, with, for instance, departmental or faculty regulation of the relative weightings to be given to coursework and to exams. But this need not constrain efforts to scrutinise the overall pattern of the work that is assigned to students in any particular course or module and the kind of assessments that are made. It is always worth re-examining the range and substance of assessments, and particularly how appropriate they are in terms of, for example:

- students' existing and developing capabilities;
- what the course / module is aiming to achieve;
- the impact on student and staff workloads.

General questions can also usefully be raised about how clearly students understand what they are required to do when, the level at which they ought to be working, and the criteria by which assignment tasks will be judged. Do students know about the practical procedures for, say, choosing a topic or advising of difficulties in meeting a deadline? Does the course documentation provide the right information and is anything else needed?

One way of getting an overview is to construct an 'audit' grid similar to the one illustrated in figure 7.1, which provides a basis for examining the extent to which course assignments allow students to practise and demonstrate achievement of core learning outcomes. If tailored to your own needs and circumstances, this technique could be used to consider assignments and assessments either at a general level (as in figure 7.1) or in a more detailed way - e.g. by mapping specifications and purposes against a linked series of essays, reports, or test papers.

FOCUS AREAS AND SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Queries aimed at identifying, from both teaching and learning perspectives, those parts of the assignment and assessment process which are working well and those which warrant improvement, are likely to fall within three main areas:

- assignment setting;
- carrying out assessment;
- assignment outcomes.

Further discussion of ways of going about reviewing assignments and assessment can be organised accordingly, with the aim of pinpointing the main questions likely to be of concern together with some practical ideas for addressing them.

AN ASSESSMENT AUDIT GRID

Weighting %	LEARNING OBJECTIVES	Practical Reports	Problem Sets	Poster Presentation	World Wide Web Exercise	Short Answer Exam
20	Conceptual Understanding	✓	✓	✓		✓
20	Problem Solving	✓	✓		✓	✓
15	Factual Recall		✓		✓	✓
15	Writing Skills	✓		✓		✓
10	Information Retrieval Skills	✓		✓	✓	
10	Laboratory Skills	✓				✓
10	Verbal Skills		✓	✓		

Figure 7.1

Usually it is wise, as in any review centred on activities for which you are responsible, to spend a little time marshalling your own thoughts and collating your reactions before tapping into others'. If you have developed at the outset your own initial sense of what is proving especially productive or problematic, you will be more receptive and make better use of information gained from other vantage points, such as feedback from students or the comments of a colleague.

ASSIGNMENT SETTING

Reflecting on assignments, whether individually or as a series, means asking a fundamental question: 'Is what I am asking students to do – as well as when, how and why – appropriate and clear?' Embedded within this are several important sub-queries relating to the assignment or set of assignments:

- how closely is it linked with course aims and objectives?
- in what ways can it carry the students' learning forward?
- how well equipped are the students to tackle the task?
- are the requisite resources available and accessible?
- is the task students are expected to undertake well-structured and focused?
- will the students have a clear understanding of what is expected of them?
- how well does the timing fit with their other commitments?
- will the rewards match the effort required?

Addressing questions such as these entails, in turn, reflecting on how well placed you will be to give students the necessary guidance and support. Will advising students, for example, call on familiar and well-honed skills on your part, or perhaps new and less familiar ones – say, in introducing poster presentations or group projects for the first time as a part of the assessment strategy for a particular course? And whether the assignment takes a novel or well-established form, what will be the implications for your own workload? Can the time needed for support, comment and marking be readily found, or will other priorities need to be reappraised?

You may feel able to respond to these key questions about assignment setting largely by means of systematic self-reflection. However, some checking out and discussion with colleagues is likely to be beneficial – as happens when someone with an experienced eye is able to spot ambiguities in questions or problem sets. A fresh look, for instance, at how the performance or submission criteria for an assignment are being transmitted and explained to students, may well throw up promising possibilities for improving on an initial draft. And preview discussion with a colleague about how prepared your students are likely to be for tackling a specific assignment, or about the practicalities entailed in a particular kind of assessment, often yields helpful suggestions.

Clearly, then, careful preparation and taking action in advance to avoid potential problems will pay dividends – for students and teacher alike. Thus, part of the groundwork for assignments might also usefully involve:

- further exploration with students of what they ought to be striving to achieve, either by discussing established assignment/assessment criteria or maybe by jointly creating them;
- encouraging your students to share (initially in small groups if the class is large) their own strategies for how best to set about a given assignment in order to achieve a high-quality outcome.

Yet there are some telling insights which can only be gleaned retrospectively; the old truism about the proof of the pudding remains sound, and it is not until an assignment has been completed and assessed that what was achieved (and what that achievement entailed) is fully apparent. So assignment outcomes (see the section below) can often provide an indirect but revealing source of information. The direct experience of the students doing the assignment(s) and what they thought of other elements within the assessment process can be tapped by the methods mentioned in Chapter 2.

Figure 7.2 suggests one way of exploring the student experience, in the form of an extract from a longer questionnaire. By asking questions about the seriousness as well as the frequency of an issue, this example is particularly suited to reviewing an assignment type or series, such as oral presentations or lab reports. And the inclusion of a prompt for further details on specific problems encountered helps pinpoint what needs improving. Each issue listed can of course be made as global or as specific as necessary – so that an issue such as the availability of resources, for example, could be subdivided into 'labs', 'IT', 'library', and 'other'.

EXTRACT FROM A COURSE ASSESSMENT ISSUES QUESTIONNAIRE

Course Assessment Issues	How frequently is this issue a problem?			How serious is this issue for you?		
	Never	Sometimes	Often	Not at all	Somewhat	Very
5. Finding out the standard of work required.						
6. Overall clarity of what assignments require.						
7. Overall assignment workload.						
8. Availability of resources for doing assignments.						
9. Time needed to complete assignments.						

If you have ticked 'often' or 'very', please explain further below.

Issue No.	Comments

Figure 7.2

CARRYING OUT ASSESSMENT

When the focus of reviewing moves on to consider how you fared in managing and doing the assessing, the equitable treatment of students and the helpfulness of the feedback provided are the issues which will come to the fore.

What particular questions are most appropriate will depend somewhat on the nature of the assignment and the assessment made. If, for instance, the assignment involves reading for a tutorial, or giving a presentation, assessments will necessarily be made on the spot. But when it entails written work such as a laboratory or fieldwork report, the question arises of the turnaround time between the submission of an assignment and its return to the students complete with mark and comments. Some departments and faculties stipulate maximum turnaround times for different kinds of assignments; others prefer to leave it to the discretion of the tutors concerned, but suggest that they advise students of the target date. In any event, the longer the turnaround time, the lower the likelihood that students will be able to learn from the feedback offered.

Assessed written assignments also bring into question how even-handedly procedures to do with deadlines, extensions, or late submissions have been applied, issues which certainly occur in relation to oral work but take another form. Examinations, particularly the 'terminal' kind, commonly do not offer the same scope as formative assignments (and

as other kinds of summative assessment can also do), for making clear to students the reasons why their work is deemed to be of a certain standard or for providing pointers as to how they could improve.

Depending therefore on the type of assignment or assessment in focus, the emphasis of the questions to be put will differ. At the same time, whenever the equity and productiveness of tutors' judgements and comments are under review, certain core queries arise. They include:

- were my expectations of the students realistic?
- did I allow enough time to mark and to comment?
- did I apply the assessment criteria consistently?
- have I identified strengths as well as weaknesses?
- have I given students *constructive* feedback i.e. feedback which can help them to learn more effectively?

If placement on a scale of marks or grades is involved, a further set of concerns comes into play, generating questions such as the following:

- have I treated all students' work equally?
- do my comments tally with the mark given?
- have I utilised a full range of marks/grades?
- are my marks comparable to those awarded by other assessors?

Once the appropriate questions have been identified, it is a matter of getting some answers. Self-reflection is a good first step, but involving a colleague and/or students is also an attractive option.

One aid to reflection is to compile a checklist itemising what you consider to be the critical features in carrying out particular assessments. Another possibility is to use a structured feedback form to accompany the marking task, adopting or adapting one from the many that are available in most subject areas and disciplines.[7] A suitably tailored pro forma can assist not only with actually doing the assessing but also with monitoring how effectively assessment has been carried out. The use of a standard format helps to economise on effort, even though it still needs to be accompanied by specific textual comments in an appropriate form. It also acts as a cross-check on impressionistic ratings, helping to ensure that you attend in a consistent way to the particular aspects highlighted as important, and that your views about the different aspects of their work are clearly and concisely conveyed to students.

The example shown (figure 7.3), a composite marking attachment, combines tick boxes with open comment, and marker assessment with student self-assessment. Asking students to evaluate their own work is a useful exercise in fostering the development of critical skills,[7] though they may be reluctant initially and find it hard to do – especially the acknowledgement of strengths. The use of self assessment here helps alert the assessor to the sort of feedback most likely to benefit an individual student, and seeing subsequently how well his or her judgements match their own will in turn prove instructive for the students.

Having a single summary sheet that is readily reproduced – by photocopying or using carbon paper or logging on disk – not only assists with record keeping in general, it also helps keep track of students' progress in different aspects of their work, enabling you to build on earlier comments and suggestions.

If you and your colleagues are involved in cross- or second-marking of students' work, then each of you will have an opportunity to learn more about one another's grading standards and commenting styles. However, since double-marking often happens during pressurised periods when the timeframe is very short, attention tends to focus on the immediate priority, the calibration of marks, instead of leading on to general discussion among colleagues of marking and feedback practices. So it may be worthwhile arranging to return to such considerations at a later date, or to engage in collaborative commenting with a selected colleague on another and more opportune occasion.

Collaborative comment is relatively straightforward to set up. You simply invite an appropriate colleague to review the quality, quantity, and usefulness of your comments, rather than the allocation of any marks, and to share their observations with you. Whether done on a reciprocal basis or not, the consequent stimulus to fresh thinking, which could include ways of relaying feedback to students, may enable you to reduce the time you spend without compromising the contribution of your marking and commenting to student learning.

Student perceptions of how the assessment process has been carried out are also readily obtainable – by means of a questionnaire, a structured group discussion, or maybe a post-it display. The use of

A MARKING ATTACHMENT

To be completed by the students:

Name:
Date Submitted: Assignment: Term 1 Term 2 Term 3
Essay no. & short title:

To be completed by the marker:

Marker:
Mark:
Date returned:

*Please indicate by ticking in the **student column** below how you feel you have handled the various aspects of essay writing listed below. The marker will enter his/her corresponding assessments, as well as make further comments both on your script and below.*

	EXCELLENT		VERY GOOD		SATISFACTORY		NEEDS IMPROVEMENT		POOR		**Marker's Specific Comments**
	Student	**Marker**	Student	**Marker**	Student	**Marker**	Student	**Marker**	Student	**Marker**	
KNOWLEDGE BASE *Breadth?* *Depth?*											
RELEVANCE *Question answered?* *Use of information?*											
STRUCTURE *Overall organisation?* *Clear, logical progression?*											
ANALYSIS AND ARGUMENT *Critical discussion?* *Supporting material?*											
EXPRESSION AND STYLE *Grammatical?* *Clear and fluent?*											
PRESENTATION *Layout and legibility?* *Sources acknowledged?*											

Marker's Overall Comments:

69 ... 70

Figure 7.3

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

post-it notes is a relatively quick and easy method. Distribute three notes to each student for them to label with the three headings illustrated in figure 7.4. Then ask them to write below each heading what they would like you to continue, to stop, and to start doing - in this instance, in relation to your commenting. The completed post-its are then put

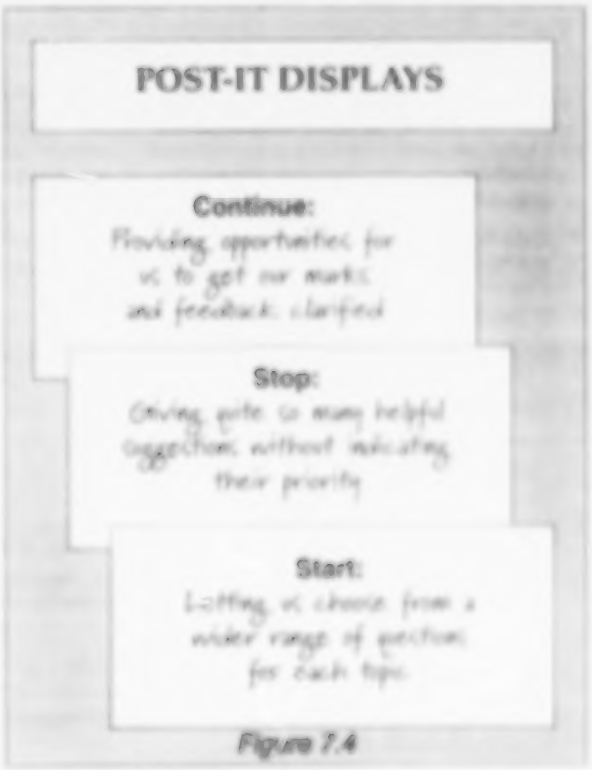
POST-IT DISPLAYS
Continue:
Providing opportunities for us to get our marks and feedback clarified
Stop:
Giving quite so many helpful suggestions without indicating their priority
Start:
Letting us choose from a wider range of questions for each topic

Figure 7.4

on view (on a board, wall or door), with the 'continue', 'stop', 'start' suggestions grouped together. After collecting them up you can identify the main themes under each heading, for inclusion in your review.

ASSIGNMENT OUTCOMES

The work students produce is of course an important indicator of what has been achieved. It is already to hand and if consciously capitalised upon can yield information about the development of knowledge, understanding and skills across an entire cohort of students, as well as by sub-groups such as access, mature or overseas students or students with different kinds of entry qualifications or prior educational experiences. And the insights to be gained have the distinctive feature of extending beyond what is under immediate scrutiny. Thus, in considering the evidence from students' work, indications are available not just about the effectiveness of particular assignments or assessments in promoting student learning, but also in relation to broader aspects of your teaching – for example, the lectures, tutorials, practicals and study materials which provided the cornerstones for the work the students submitted.

There is therefore a double question to be asked – and answered – namely, what does how students carried out work assigned have to say about a) its appropriateness and value in progressing their learning; and b) about the impact and effectiveness of my teaching?

Some of the methods for using assignment outcomes to shed light on this or other aspects of your teaching, will come naturally. So in listening to, looking at or reading students' work, any alert teacher will gradually be accumulating impressions about what the students have got out of doing it, what things have gone well and what has caused difficulties. Thus in reviewing your assessment practices from this standpoint, you will be trying to sort out in your own mind what is attributable to such factors as:

- the task itself (how it was focused, set up, resourced; whether it was appropriately challenging, etc.);
- the timing of it and the time allowed for it;
- your part in briefing, supporting, and assessing the task;
- the effort and energy that for one reason or another students have committed to it;
- the extent to which the rest of your teaching helped prepare students for tackling the assessment.

Although it is never easy to disentangle the effects of the factors which influence assessment outcomes, or to know quite what inferences to draw about the nature and value of assignments, assessments, or your teaching, it is still worth carrying out a fairly systematic analysis. In some instances this may mean asking teaching colleagues (tutors, demonstrators, or teaching assistants say) to keep a regular record of anything which surfaces in their classes that has a bearing on the assignment and assessment tasks for which you are responsible. If copies are kept of assignment attachments (like the example which was given in figure 7.3), these can be analysed to give an overall picture of what areas of performance are proving satisfactory or problematic for a given group of students.

Where there are options or a choice of questions, in a course or exam assignment, further light can be shed by making comparisons to see, for example:

- which were the most or least popular;
- which yielded higher or lower marks;
- which engaged and enthused students most.

Thus if a particular topic is studiously avoided by a large number of candidates, this might indicate either a weakness in the framing of that question or perhaps more far-reaching problems with the teaching of that subject area.

As with any set of data, assignment outcomes do not necessarily speak for themselves. Possible meanings and potential implications are therefore best teased out in conversation with colleagues, as well as (if circumstances permit) by following things up and checking things out with the students concerned.

ENHANCING ASSESSMENT EXPERTISE

In this chapter, we have tried to survey the many different ways in which you can review – and thus seek to enhance – your day-to-day work as an assessor of students' learning. Yet as far as assessment in particular is concerned, reflection and scrutiny may not in themselves provide a sufficient basis for strengthening practice over the longer term. Assessment, as we have seen, is a complex and exacting aspect of university teaching which is continually undergoing refinement and development in new directions. Keeping abreast of new insights about what, how, when and why to assess is therefore part-and-parcel of the review process. A periodic look at publications of the kind listed below may be one worthwhile means of keeping up-to-date.

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Chapter 8

Unfinished Business

Evaluation is best conceptualised not as something that is done to teachers by experts wielding questionnaires and computers, but as something that is done by teachers for the benefit of their professional competence and their students' understanding.

Paul Ramsden

Until quite recently, and particularly in North American universities, the review and evaluation of teaching was often associated with centrally managed systems for designing, processing and analysing student ratings questionnaires. The questionnaires used were typically of a standardised or uniform type and their paramount function was judgmental: the results formed part of decision-making procedures on tenure, promotion and annual salary awards. Needless to say, this approach was predicated on the twin assumptions that a single institution-wide instrument could appropriately be deployed across the full spectrum of courses and programmes of study and that it was a viable way of securing improvements in the quality of teaching. Other linked assumptions – though not always explicit ones – were that the ratings data could be relied upon to 'speak for themselves' and that the process was reliable in differentiating those who could teach well from those who could not.

These assumptions, however, have been increasingly called into question. There are concerns that, over and above the substantial commitment of resources entailed, centrally managed systems fail to capture the many subtle but crucial differences between disciplines in how learning and teaching are pursued, while at the same time appearing to strip university and college teachers of any individual responsibility for the quality of their interactions with students. Most importantly of all, perhaps, the regular administration of standardised questionnaires seems in itself to have had little observable effect on teaching quality. For example, one meticulous study of an impressively large data-set revealed a high degree of stability in the profiles of university teachers over a thirteen-year period – in other words, individuals' teaching strengths and weaknesses had changed very little, despite regular ratings of their teaching.[1] What, then, was the point of this costly procedure, if its pedagogical benefits were so hard to discern? And how might students to be persuaded to devote effort each semester to rating their teachers, if the teachers concerned seem unready or unable to respond constructively to their students' perceptions?

By now, we trust, it will be clear that the approach to feedback and evaluation advocated in this handbook proceeds from fundamentally different premises. We do not believe that university teachers are always born or seldom made: on the contrary, lecturers and tutors can develop and extend their teaching expertise by regularly reviewing what they are doing, seeking feedback along a variety of channels, and reflecting on how they might achieve a better match between their aspirations and their achievements. Similarly, excellence in teaching is not a state of academic grace which, once arrived at, needs no further refinement, for the processes of learning and teaching in higher education are dynamic, not static, and they are locked into context and circumstance rather than preshaped in a universal template. Succeeding cohorts of students alter perceptibly in their aptitudes, concerns and enthusiasms, the contours of subjects and disciplines shift, opening up new teaching terrain and pushing back what was once high ground, resources for learning shrink, grow (if only very occasionally) and are reconfigured, fresh ideas

emerge about how – and what – to teach and to assess; and new technology stretches the boundaries of what is desirable and practicable, within and beyond the academic classroom. In this setting of ebb and flow, what counts as high-quality university teaching is also, inescapably, in metamorphosis. What worked well last time around will not necessarily continue to be effective with a different class, a new course, another seminar group, a fresh venue or a changed pattern of aims and objectives.

It follows that reviewing your teaching is always unfinished business, for to teach well in higher education means remaining alert to the consequences, intended and unintended, of what you do, and periodically adjusting and refining your approach in the light of what you glean from feedback, whether it be incidental, self-generated or gathered from students, colleagues and peers. It also means keeping a watchful eye out for new teaching ideas that you could adopt or adapt: the larger your personal repertoire of methods and strategies, the wider will be the pool of options you can select from in tackling an issue arising from a review.

If this sounds like a counsel of perfection, however, the wrong impression has been given. No one can realistically subject everything that they do to constant review, nor would it be fruitful to do so, for the more time and effort that is expended on feedback, the less there is left over for the day-to-day practices of teaching, learning and assessment. We have therefore tried, in this handbook, to suggest a large variety of ways in which you might review your teaching, and so maximise the likelihood of a reasonable match between what you would like – and would find it possible – to review, and how you might feasibly go about it. In so doing, we have put an appropriately high premium on the exercise of personal and professional judgement. There is no ideal approach or focus or time to review, just as there is no single way of acting on whatever findings emerge. It is for you to decide what in a given context most merits reviewing, when and how you might best carry it out, and what adjustments if any you might in consequence make to your teaching.

This handbook, too, is unfinished business. We have tried not only to dig deeper than that universal question, 'Am I doing OK?', but also to venture beyond broad-brush feedback, pick out specific domains of teaching expertise, and explore how each might most appropriately be reviewed. The results, however, are not all-embracing, for we have consciously focused on face-to-face teaching activities in taught courses. Inevitably, therefore, some teaching activities fall outside the scope of this handbook – among them, postgraduate research supervision, distance, open and flexible learning, course management, and teaching initiatives which are strongly geared to the use of computing and information technology. Perhaps at some future date a second volume, or a follow-up handbook, will be called for explore how those areas too might be reviewed? In the meantime, if you have any suggestions for additional materials which could be posted on the *Reviewing Your Teaching* website, we would be delighted to hear from you. Information on how to get in touch with us can be found in the opening pages of this handbook.

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1. Ramsden, P. (1992). *Learning to Teach in Higher Education*. London: Routledge. p.257.

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This major new handbook aims to assist university and college lecturers to review the quality of their teaching in ways that can lead to real and worthwhile improvements. The handbook highlights specific methods and sources of feedback for each of the teaching activities typically associated with taught courses in higher education: lectures, tutorials and other forms of group-based learning; laboratory and fieldwork practicals; the supervision of projects and dissertations; and assignments and assessment.

The handbook includes a large number of examples of suitable resource materials, most of which have been specially devised to reflect one of its guiding themes – that while reviewing one's teaching is highly desirable, it should not call for a disproportionate effort. The handbook therefore explores how teaching can be selectively as well as reflectively reviewed, with an eye to individual and professional needs and priorities.

Its publication is particularly timely at a period when the Institute for Learning and Teaching is being established to accredit programmes of professional development for higher education teachers. The majority of these programmes make use of portfolios as a means of assessment, and the handbook offers a wealth of ideas about how teaching expertise can be reviewed and documented for portfolio purposes.

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